FROM *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

CASE FILE

COMPENDIUM

Bing An Ben

7

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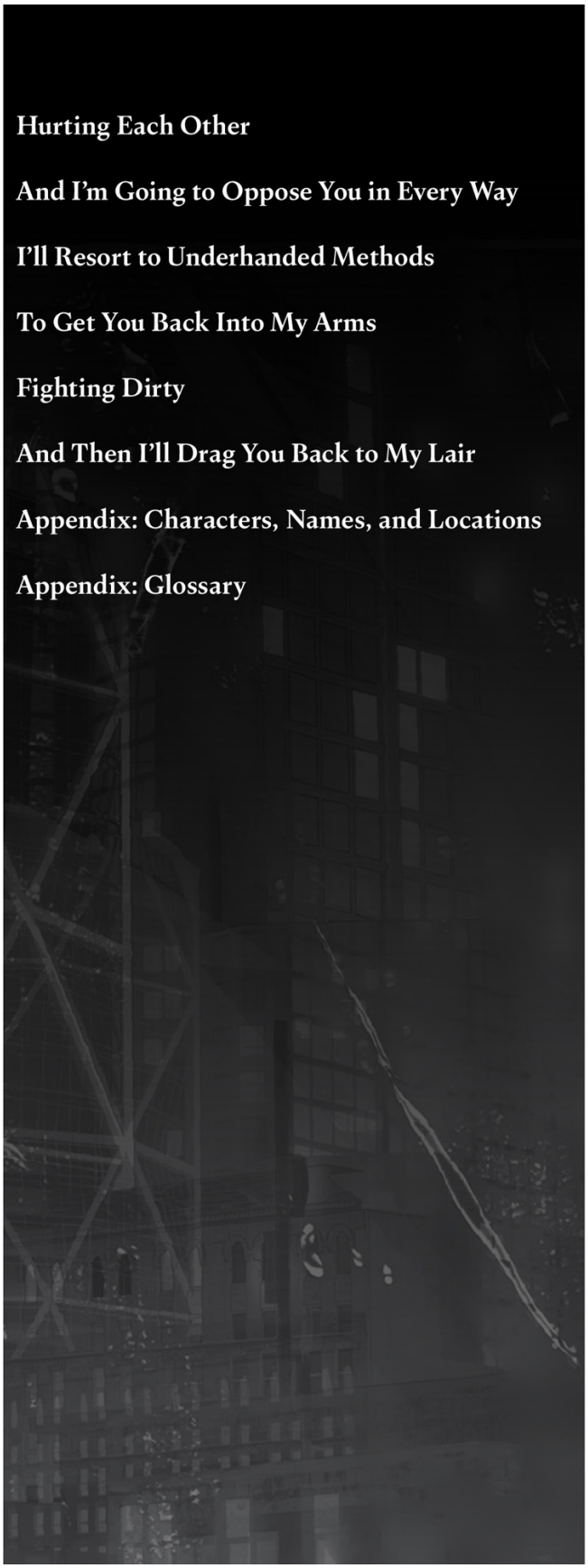

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Chapter 180:
Into the Distance

A YOUNG MAN from a prestigious family like Chen Man deciding to move so far away was a big deal. An occasion like that demanded a proper gathering—some kind of send-off party, at the very least. But he left in such a hurry that nobody had time to plan anything of the sort, not even his parents.

With no opportunity for a farewell party, the Chens' extended family, along with their friends, business partners, and government affiliates, all came to see him off at the airport.

"Please take some tokens of our appreciation. Take care of yourself in Guangshi."

"Smooth sailing, Manman-gege!" a little girl chirped.

Her mother hastily corrected her: "He's getting on a plane. You're supposed to say 'Fly safe,' not 'Smooth sailing,' okay?"

The little girl scratched her head and changed her tune with a toothy grin. "Okay. Fly safe, Manman-gege."

Chen Man thanked them each in turn; then, after taking his leave from the rest of the crowd, he went to hug his weeping mother. "Mom, don't worry, it'll be fine. I'll check in with you often," he told her, but she was still crying too hard to speak.

His father sighed. "Running off to become a frontline police officer for no good reason, and you won't change your mind no matter what we say. Your grandpa nearly lost his voice chewing us out yesterday—if he didn't have to go to that key cadre meeting in Yanzhou, I bet he would've flown here to scold you himself." He paused. "…Ah, whatever. It's too late for lectures now. Take care of yourself."

Chen Man nodded.

It was a large gathering; there were some people there whom he barely even knew. He scanned the crowd as if he was waiting for someone

to appear, but the boarding time arrived before anyone else did.

His eyes slowly filled with a disappointment he couldn't hide.

"Go on," his father said. "Call us when you land."

Chen Man nodded. With his ticket in hand, he turned to leave—only to be stopped by the sound of someone's voice.

"Chen Yan."

Chen Man jolted as if he'd touched a live wire. He shuddered, his eyes seeking out a tall and familiar figure. Through the airport's thronging crowd, Xie Qingcheng walked toward him, wearing a pale lotus-colored shirt and ash-gray slacks. His hands were tucked into his pockets.

"Xie-ge…" Chen Man murmured, dreamlike.

Xie Qingcheng came to a stop in front of him and passed him a red envelope. "…We don't need to talk about the rest."

"Ge…"

"You've made up your mind, and I wish you no regrets. This is my gift to you. I hope you can find a fresh start."

With everyone watching, Chen Man could only reveal so much. The shaking of his hands as he took the red packet was the only clue to his churning emotions. The front of the envelope had been labeled in a familiar, angular hand: *Safe and Sound*. Those words alone were enough to make Chen Man's vision swim.

Xie Qingcheng didn't actually have particularly high expectations for him. All he wanted was for Chen Man to be safe and sound in Guangshi. After Chen Man took the envelope, Xie Qingcheng said, "Open it when you're alone."

Despite his confusion, Chen Man acquiesced.

Watching him quietly for a beat or two, Xie Qingcheng looked as if he wanted to say something else, but—because of what happened between them—the words never made it out of his mouth.

An announcement rang over the loudspeakers. Chen Man returned to his senses. "Ge." His voice was very soft. "Thank you for coming to see me off today."

Xie Qingcheng patted him on the shoulder. “Go on.”

Chen Man went through security. His parents thanked the guests, but his father was noticeably cool toward Xie Qingcheng—even though it wasn’t the Xie family’s fault that Chen Lisheng died, he’d always thought that the only reason Chen Lisheng had lost his life was because he’d been so determined to pursue justice for them.

Xie Qingcheng didn’t mind. Once he’d bidden Chen Man farewell, he left on his own.

“Hey, did you see that? That was Xie Xue’s gege.”

“Who?”

“The guy who showed up at the end to give Chen Yan a red packet. The tall, handsome one.”

On his way out of the airport, Xie Qingcheng went to the convenience store to get a cup of coffee. Two rich madams who’d come to see Chen Man off just so happened to be there too. They’d all heard of the salacious goings-on at the wedding, but one of them had never seen Xie Qingcheng, and she was engrossed in the other madam’s retelling.

“Oh my goodness, it was *him*? I heard people talk about him and Young Master He, but I thought he’d have more of a, you know, slutty vixen type of look to him! That man looked pretty respectable, definitely more manly than my husband—or yours, for that matter. How could he have gotten Young Master He in bed? You must be kidding?”

“Who’s kidding? That’s him! Go search it up if you don’t believe me. He’s been in the news a bunch. You can find pictures and videos of him online.”

Madam Kuo looked it up and gasped out loud. “It really is him…but he doesn’t look gay at all. I’ve seen male sugar babies before. Aiyo, they’re fresh-faced as anything—they’ve taken better care of themselves than me! What’s Young Master He doing? Couldn’t he at least pick a softer-looking one?”

“You’re wrong there.” Her bestie lowered her voice to a whisper. “It’s all the rage for these rich kids to play with straight guys, or guys who look straight. That’s what makes it satisfying, you know. And Madam Zhong, she

saw the whole thing, and she said Professor Xie made *such* noises—aiyo, even as a woman, she was impressed. No wonder he's got Young Master He wrapped around his little finger."

"She must be exaggerating. It's just a man's voice, after all."

"It's not just Madam Zhong—Madam Fan said so too. You know Madam Fan's tastes—she owns the Skynight Club, after all. You think *she* wouldn't know, with her stable of pretty boys?"

They sipped their coffees with their backs to Xie Qingcheng, wholly ignorant that the subject of their conversation himself was standing there in the convenience store. All this slander, but he couldn't stop them or clear his name. It was better to pretend he hadn't heard—after all, it wasn't like there was any shortage of rumors about him. He was used to it by now.

But the conversation wasn't finished, and they moved off Xie Qingcheng and onto He Yu.

"Do you think Young Master He is serious about him?"

"I think it's possible…"

"That's outrageous."

"Aiya, it's not like you don't know what he's like. He's the haughtiest and pickiest of all the rich scions of Huzhou. Before word got out about him and Xie Qingcheng, there was never any sign of him having interest in anyone at all—and then the news broke that he was sleeping with a man who used to be his personal doctor." Madam Kuo spoke in a stage whisper. "His personal doctor, remember? I hear he was employed with the family for almost a decade, and he took care of Young Master He since he was eight. Think about it: Young Master He going through puberty at his side…? If you tried to tell me nothing happened, I wouldn't believe you."

"Aiyo…" That made the other madam's imagination run wild. "That's far too…" She clicked her tongue.

They lowered their voices even further, their whispers becoming more and more obscene. "Who knows when they got together. What if Young Master He's first time as he was growing up…was spent with his 'personal' doctor? When I was talking to Madam Zhong, she said they'd definitely been together for years and years."

“All that time and they’re still so lusty? He didn’t even hold back at his own sister’s wedding—how shameless.”

“You said it! Honestly, it doesn’t matter how long they were together in secret. Young Master He’s probably going to call it quits with his doctor lover soon.”

Madam Kuo’s ears perked up. “Oh? What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you heard? He’s hardly even left the house lately, never mind going after Xie Qingcheng. Everyone thinks his dad must have chewed him out. It *was* hugely embarrassing, wasn’t it? Nobody’s dared to talk openly about what happened at the wedding, but who hasn’t discussed it in private? Both He Jiwei and Lü Zhishu have been disgraced to the bone by their eldest son. You know how Lü Zhishu is—she’s definitely going to make Young Master He end things with his doctor.”

“Now that you mention it…we haven’t heard anything from the He family in a while.”

“Right? In these circles it’s no big deal to be a playboy, and no one *really* cares if you’re a playboy who sleeps with men. But a playboy who sleeps with a man at someone else’s wedding and gets caught with his pants down in front of so many people—*that’s* real humiliation. If I were Lü Zhishu, I’d hole up with the entire rest of my family.”

Xie Qingcheng was vexed. Chugging the last of his coffee, he tossed the cup into the garbage can and turned to leave. But then—

“Honestly, d’you think someone’s done marriage voodoo on the Wei family? How come they’re always getting into wedding scandals? Remember Wei Rong? Back when we were young, she was in the same boat—”

He jolted. *Wei Rong?*

Xie Qingcheng had never expected to hear that particular name. He froze where he was.

“If you hadn’t said anything, I would’ve forgotten. It’s been almost twenty years now, hasn’t it? I wasn’t even married yet.”

Madam Kuo sighed. “I remember it like it was yesterday. That was the strangest wedding I’ve ever been to—it felt like a funeral. The bride and

groom might as well have both had ‘Marriage of Convenience’ stamped on their foreheads. When they were exchanging rings, Wei Rong actually dropped hers. Her face was all flat when she went down the stage to pick it up, and then she shoved it on Meng Sheng’s hand without even bothering to wipe it clean.”

“And it wasn’t even the right finger.”

“Right. The looks on their families’ faces at that, my goodness.” Madam Kuo shook her head. “*Tsk tsk tsk*, I remember it clear as day. Later when Meng Sheng remarried, he buried all the news about having once been engaged to Wei Rong. It probably wasn’t much of a happy marriage—no wonder the Wei family couldn’t really say anything.”

“To be honest, Wei Rong was a funny one. I heard she looked down on Meng Sheng because he was ugly, but was she much of a looker herself? A researcher who went around barefaced all day… I hated her guts back then. I tried to be friends with her at first because I felt bad for her, but she turned out to be arrogant like nothing else. All she did was show off how smart she was; she called all of us who didn’t spend all our time with our noses in a book ‘pig brains.’ Unlike *her*, star student of Huzhou Medical and Qin Ciyan’s own pupil.”

Xie Qingcheng jolted again.

Madam Kuo and her friend finished their coffee. They tidied their things and rose from their seats, cheeks aglow with the thrill of gossip.

“So what if she was a star student? So what if she was Academician Qin’s pupil?” Madam Kuo was saying. “All she ever did was study, and did she get anything out of it?”

“Too bad she died young,” her friend scoffed. “*Surely* someone as smart as her could’ve nabbed herself a Nobel Prize.”

These two ladies must have truly despised Wei Rong. Normal people wouldn’t go out of their way to speak ill of the dead, but they just couldn’t stop themselves—the acrid, biting comments didn’t stop even after they left the store.

The automatic doors slid shut behind them.

Xie Qingcheng stood where he was, the woman's voice echoing in his ears.

Unlike her, star student of Huzhou Medical and Qin Ciyan's own pupil.

He called a car as soon as he left the airport, heading right to the archives of Huzhou Medical. The leaden grays of the city flew past him, looming towers shot through with golden sun. His heart pounded to the beat of a drum, every throb a surge of pain through his whole chest. He knew in his bones that, after so many years, he was drawing ever closer to a crucial part of the truth.

On the plane, Chen Man opened the red packet Xie Qingcheng had given him. Along with the good-luck money, there was a yellowing card inside. It looked familiar. Chen Man unfolded it slowly, but tears welled in his eyes before he could even read half of it.

It was a card he'd given Xie Qingcheng in the spring of the second year after his brother passed. The clumsy handwriting was faded now, but Xie Qingcheng had kept the card perfectly preserved.

It said:

Xie Qingcheng-gege, thank you for protecting and encouraging me in my big brother's place. I hope you can be my gege forever. I will always stay with you—Xie Xue and I will stay with you forever. We're all going to be happy together for the rest of our lives.

Chen Yan

Beneath that aged, childish scrawl lay a brand new line of pitch-black, slightly tilted script, written in Xie Qingcheng's hand.

A lifetime is a long time. Take care as you forge on ahead; avoid arrogance or despair, and await the joy that will be yours.

That child of the past had failed to do as the card had promised—to see Xie Qingcheng as his big brother forever. There was no happily ever after possible for them. At age twenty, the 'forever' Chen Man had written about at age thirteen seemed like a hilariously juvenile joke.

For Xie Qingcheng, on the far side of thirty, it was a beautiful dream to which he could never return.

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Chapter 181:
Atop the Throne

HUZHOU MEDICAL'S ARCHIVES were overflowing with old records, and everything from before the year 2000 were hard copies that hadn't been digitized. Some had been transferred around and put back in the wrong place, too—in the end it took Xie Qingcheng almost a month to find Wei Rong's original files.

Wei Rong had been an extraordinarily high-achieving surgery postgraduate. Her transcripts showed that she'd had full marks in almost all her specialty courses; however, she never joined any clubs or extracurriculars, and her grades in her arts and physical education electives were barely passing. It looked like she'd had no interest in anything outside of her specialization.

Xie Qingcheng flipped onward. On the very last page, he found a two-inch ID photo taken at Wei Rong's graduation. That was how, almost twenty years later, Xie Qingcheng finally saw the face of the woman who'd lost an earring at that club in Yanzhou.

It was the face of a forgettable female student. Her face was on the rounder side. She did have double eyelids, but they were just puffy enough to make her gaze seem listless. Her features were flat and unassuming, like a pencil sketch someone had run an eraser over. In the photograph, she wore her long black hair down and she was staring haughtily beyond the camera. She might not have been a contender for Miss Universe, but it was clear her impressive family background and outstanding academic achievement gave her some measure of pride and self-assurance.

For some reason, looking at the photo sent chills up Xie Qingcheng's spine.

He'd felt the same thing when he'd seen the photo of Jin Xiuhe. Of course, that mystery had been solved, and Xie Qingcheng had learned that Jin Xiuhe was Jiang Lanpei—that unnerving feeling had likely been a result of his brain noticing an eerie familiarity he couldn't place no matter how hard he tried.

Had he seen a photo of Wei Rong in Qin Ciyan's home before? In a photo album with his other students? Xie Qingcheng couldn't remember. All of Qin Ciyan's belongings had been disposed of or buried with him; if he'd seen a picture of Wei Rong somewhere in his things, there was no longer any way of knowing.

He carefully reread the entire file from beginning to end. This time, there was an even more surprising discovery.

Wei Rong had done an internship with a pharmaceutical start-up; she achieved spectacular results during her work term, and on the practical experience transcript, her supervisor gave her a glowing review. That supervisor's name, stark against the page, was none other than He Jiwei!

Just like him, she'd gone to work at He Jiwei's company through Lao-Qin. But while Xie Qingcheng hadn't stayed at He Jiwei's lab for long, Wei Rong had kept on working there after graduation and up until her accident. Distressed, Xie Qingcheng decided he needed to meet with He Jiwei as soon as possible. He called him right away.

Beep-beep-beep…

His hand shook as he waited for the man to pick up. The truth was coming ever closer…so long as He Jiwei was willing to help him…

But, perhaps because He Jiwei had heard about him and He Yu, his calls—all five of them—went unanswered.

Now it was late enough into the night that Xie Qingcheng thought there was no chance of He Jiwei returning his calls ever again. He sank into endless frustration and anxiety, smoking like a chimney. But just as the mountain of stubbed-out ashes threatened to bury him whole, his phone rang. He jolted awake and looked at the contact name—it was He Jiwei.

His pupils shrank. He could hear his blood rushing in his ears. He answered it at once. "Executive He."

But there was only a faint, static silence on the other end.

Moonlight spilled through the window. Xie Qingcheng sat by the bed, heart racing. He didn't know how much time passed as he tried to keep his breathing under control, waiting for He Jiwei's answer. It could've been minutes, or only a few seconds.

Finally, a voice came through the speaker, but it didn’t belong to He Jiwei. It was someone else, someone more familiar.

“Xie Qingcheng…” said He Yu.

Xie Qingcheng was stunned. “Why is it you? Where’s your dad?”

There was another prolonged silence. Xie Qingcheng felt a vein pulsing on the back of his neck. He kneaded at it, doing his best to settle his unease. There was too much wrong here… Why would He Yu be using He Jiwei’s phone? And He Yu’s voice didn’t sound quite right either. It was as if he was doing his best to hold back some kind of emotion that was stubbornly threatening to push its way up out of his throat. The conflicting pressure made him sound uncharacteristically unclear.

Xie Qingcheng’s heart hung in his throat. “Where are you?”

“…Outside your door.”

Silence.

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“Won’t you open up?” said He Yu. “I want to see you.”

The request was so shocking that Xie Qingcheng forgot he was supposed to be ignoring He Yu. He got up and off the bed, and when he pulled open the door, there He Yu really was, standing beneath the climbing rose vines of the alley. His black clothes only made his skin look all the more pale; the phone was still in his hand, the call still active. He watched Xie Qingcheng quietly, his face perfectly still.

Xie Qingcheng glanced automatically at his wrist, wanting to know how he was feeling—only to realize He Yu had taken the bracelet off. His wrist was completely bare.

He Yu straightened up and ended the call, then walked up to him bathed in moonlight. He hadn’t said a word, and nothing showed on his face, but his body language was night and day compared to the last time they’d seen each other, over a month ago.

“Invite me in, Xie Qingcheng.” He turned his head, his lowered lashes silvered by the moon. “This is the only place I can be right now.”

His behavior seemed so strange. Xie Qingcheng didn’t shoo him off. Instead, he let him in and closed the door.

“Did something happen?” he asked.

He Yu stayed silent, but his lips went bloodless. Xie Qingcheng decided not to press him further; instead he went to the counter and made him a pot of tea. But just as he went to prepare the cups, He Yu stood and came up behind him, reaching out and wrapping his arms around Xie Qingcheng’s waist.

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

“Don’t move,” He Yu rasped, before Xie Qingcheng could push him away. “…Let me hold you for a while, okay? My heart’s breaking. You’re the only one who can settle me down at all.”

“He Yu…what happened to you?”

He Yu clutched him so tight that Xie Qingcheng couldn’t turn around. “Don’t look back. I’m so pathetic right now, it’s not a pretty sight. I don’t want you to hate me even more than you already do.”

Xie Qingcheng could feel warm tears soaking into the fabric over his shoulder. He Yu wouldn't let him look at him because he was crying.

He let himself be held for a long time. Although He Yu hardly said a word, Xie Qingcheng had the sense that before him lay a dense fog, through which the massive, indistinct shape of some ghastly monstrosity was slowly coming into view.

While He Yu hardly ever cried in front of anyone else, with Xie Qingcheng he often wept inconsolably. This time seemed different from anything that happened before, though. He Yu was so very fragile. As if he was ensnared by conflicting emotions, and those emotions had made him so breakable.

The room was silent but for the beating of his heart.

Thump, thump.

"Did you know…?"

The shape of the monster loomed closer in the fog.

"He's dead," He Yu said, at last.

Thump—

One second, then two… His heart seemed to stop, or perhaps the ringing in his ears had just drowned out the quiet thudding in his chest.

He hadn't said who, but Xie Qingcheng instantly understood.

The monster came roaring out of the mist, face twisted and maw agape like an underworld guardian. Behind it rose the flags of the heralds of the dead.

"He's dead," repeated He Yu, though for whose benefit was unclear. "He's dead…"

It took Xie Qingcheng an eternity to put the half-poured tea back on the counter. He had known He Jiwei, certainly, but he was reacting far more emotionally than he would to the news of an ordinary acquaintance's passing. He knew this was because of He Yu—the man was He Yu's father, after all.

Xie Qingcheng let He Yu hold him even tighter.

“…When did it happen?” he asked eventually, managing to keep his voice steady only with great effort.

“…It’s been nearly a month,” He Yu replied. “Due to the risks involved with the company going public in the States, it hasn’t been announced, and no word has leaked. I…I haven’t told anyone either… Mom and I have been handling it… And now it’s finally done. Tomorrow, everyone’s going to know.”

“How could that… How could it happen so suddenly? What happened?!”

“…My dad’s been sick for a long time,” said He Yu, still clutching him. “I noticed it earlier on… He seemed very stressed and upset, not physically well… But I never would’ve thought… I never would’ve thought he would…”

Xie Qingcheng went pale. “Did he—”

“It was suicide… He committed suicide.” He Yu’s face crumpled, his voice a wreck. “He drank herbicide… He Li found him and they managed to resuscitate him, but no one who drinks that stuff can survive for long. His lungs were too damaged, and there was a rapid onset of pulmonary fibrosis, each breath more difficult than the last… He held out for a few days, then…”

He Yu fell silent.

Lü Zhishu and He Jiwei hadn’t exactly been loving parents, but they were still his parents—particularly He Jiwei. He treated He Yu worse than He Li, and could be considered a terrible father indeed. But for all that he barely cared for He Yu at all, at the very least, while He Jiwei was still alive, He Yu had someone he could call Dad.

And now, without any warning, he was gone. He’d taken his own life in such a brutal way.

Xie Qingcheng was not so ruthless that he could bring himself to send He Yu away in such a state. He did his best to ease the horror he felt, calming himself enough to say in a shaking voice, “He Yu…”

“I’m fine,” mumbled He Yu, but his bloodless lips were quivering. “There’s nothing wrong at all… I’m fine… I’m perfectly fine…”

Xie Qingcheng hugged him tight.

“I’m fine…” He Yu closed his eyes, as if doing his best to hypnotize himself.

Xie Qingcheng didn’t know what to say. Though he could maintain a veneer of calm, his ears were ringing so loudly he could barely hear. He pushed through it as best he could. “Go sit at the desk, okay? I’ll get you something to drink.”

He brewed a pot of hot ginger tea with a generous amount of rock sugar, handing a cup to He Yu at the desk. Despite how hot it was outside, He Yu still seemed to be freezing. His teeth chattered, and his fingertips were icy cold.

He drank the ginger tea in tiny sips. Xie Qingcheng stared into his fine-featured face, sensing everything that weighed on him—he must have been enduring the knowledge of his father’s sudden suicide all this time, and this was his first chance to tell anyone.

“My dad never really paid any attention to me.” He Yu sat with his head lowered, hands wrapped around the cup. His reflection appeared in the amber liquid. “He was always so busy. Of the three hundred and sixty-five days in a year, it would be a miracle if I saw him on fifteen. Realistically, I shouldn’t be feeling much at all about his death. He was hardly more than a name in my phone, anyway.”

Something fell and left ripples in the tea.

He Yu’s bangs hung down in front of his face. Xie Qingcheng couldn’t see his expression; he could only hear his sandpaper voice. “But yesterday, I was looking in my phone for files he sent that I hadn’t had the chance to process. I saw a voice message he sent me a while ago, one I never listened to… That was the last voice message he ever sent me. He was asking if the wounds on my arm had healed.

“I thought it was pretty strange when I listened to it; I didn’t know why he would ask me that out of the blue. And then I found out he sent the message the day he committed suicide.” A pause. “He never really loved me, Xie Qingcheng.” Around the cup, He Yu’s fingers had gone bloodlessly pale. “Until maybe right at the end of his life.”

Xie Qingcheng was silent.

From his perspective as He Yu's personal doctor, He Jiwei and He Yu's relationship was indeed quite strange. He Jiwei didn't pay any attention to He Yu, nor was he caring or attentive. He'd supposedly loved his wife when he was young, but his wife didn't love her eldest son. For whatever reason, his wife seemed angered by this son's very existence, so the man bent to the worn and wearied woman's wishes and did his best not to reopen her wounds.

Later on, the relationship between the two of them fizzled out, and He Yu grew up. Father and son both grew used to their dispassionate relationship, and neither ever bothered to reach out.

But it would be unfair to say that He Jiwei didn't care for his eldest son at all. It was his repeated entreaties that had led Xie Qingcheng to become He Yu's personal doctor in the first place. Xie Qingcheng had paid attention during the years he spent treating He Yu—though He Jiwei didn't spend much time with his son, he never forgot to ask Xie Qingcheng for updates. These acts of care were few and far between, but blood always ran thicker than water. Some dregs of tenderness did exist between the two of them.

He Yu finished his ginger tea. "Did you know…?" he whispered as he put down the empty cup. "He left all his personal assets to me." He was utterly numb, as if He Jiwei's decision had only confused him more. "All of them.

"He Li thought it was faked. He had someone from Yanzhou come to verify the will… He's been having a fit ever since Dad passed. He doesn't believe that's what he really wanted in the end. But it was verified as authentic. The real will. Notarized."

He Yu lowered his head and grinned without a hint of genuine mirth. It was an absurd, mocking expression. "He Li said he wouldn't attend the funeral… He says He Jiwei must've gone insane in his final days. He didn't get a penny… He thought I was the one who was going to come away empty-handed—and I was prepared for that, too. Once I came of age, I hardly ever used my parents' money. It was all my own. I didn't care if they gave me anything, but He Li's not like that."

"…Maybe he thought you'd do better at managing the family businesses than He Li," said Xie Qingcheng. He paused. "What does

Executive Lü think?”

“…She didn’t expect this either.” For some reason, something flickered in He Yu’s eyes. “Their relationship was fizzling out in the last few years, but she still cared for him very much. Once it was confirmed those really were his final wishes, she didn’t protest anymore… She’s been sick for a long time. After my dad left, she didn’t have the heart to eat or drink—yesterday was the first time she seemed to settle. It’s like she’s gotten old in the blink of an eye. All her imposing aura left when my dad did.”

Xie Qingcheng fell silent.

“When I left the house this morning, she called for me,” He Yu added. “I didn’t know what she wanted, so I just stood there in the entryway watching her. And she just looked blankly back at me. Out of nowhere, she said—*I’m sorry*.”

He Yu recounted all of this with blank apathy. There was a thick callus built up around his heart; nobody could see what state that organ was in.

Before, they’d all been distressed over what happened at Xie Xue’s wedding banquet—but once there was a death in the family, everything that had seemed impossibly serious before was irrelevant.

It seemed like something that happened a lifetime ago.

Lifting his head, He Yu looked up at Xie Qingcheng standing in front of him. “Ge, I’m going to have to take my dad’s place. I heard a saying once—some thrones eat their masters. You change as soon as you take the position, and you have no choice about it. Everyone says He Jiwei was very good to my mom before he took his lofty position. That he did everything she asked. Then they drifted apart—focused on their own work, with hardly anything in common. Once, I heard my dad ask her if she still remembered how they used to be.”

He Yu lowered his lashes. “She didn’t answer him for a very long time.”

The weather was always unpredictable in the summer. It had been dark and gloomy when He Yu arrived, and now there were flashes of lightning coming through the windows. Piercing white light rent the skies,

with the sonorous rumble of thunder hot on its heels. Rain poured from the clouds, bleaching the world a featureless gray.

"…I'll get you another cup of tea," said Xie Qingcheng—but He Yu caught his wrist.

The young man in the chair yanked Xie Qingcheng close and hugged him again, like a child unwilling to part from the innocence of youth clinging to their tattered teddy bear. He buried his face into Xie Qingcheng's stomach, hugging his patchwork doll in front of the storm-swept study window. He was a mad, obsessive, and formidable young man—but now he seemed so helplessly anguished.

Xie Qingcheng could hear him sobbing. "Xie-ge…there are things I have to do. He left behind some work that I need to finish, that no one else but me can handle… Do you understand what I mean…?"

"…I do." Of course he did. Xie Qingcheng knew that feeling better than anyone.

He reached out to caress He Yu's hair, but before his fingertips even brushed the boy's head, Xie Qingcheng heard him speak again. "…I'm sorry, Ge." His voice was ragged. "This whole month I've… This whole month I've been enduring it alone, enduring it all… Reality is driving me insane. I can't take it anymore… Will you let me be willful one last time…? Won't you coddle me one last time? After today… I might not… I might never get to be He Yu again."

Certain thrones ate their masters.

He Yu had walked into a house of gold and seen an unsurpassably lavish throne—forged in gold and studded with jewels, glittering with priceless jade and chalcedony—upon which sat a skeleton. A beaded crown draped from its skull, and brocade robes swept the floor by its feet; its gnarled fingerbones were still wrapped tight around a heavy scepter.

The man in that throne was the one he had called Dad.

Twenty years ago, before there were only bones, he'd been a man of flesh and blood.

"Won't you hold me…? Xie Qingcheng…" He Yu tugged him down and stared vacantly up at him, almond eyes brimming with heartbreak and

hesitation—but in their depths lay another emotion, an even deeper secret. It was buried beyond sight, far beneath his dark pupils.

"He Yu…" whispered Xie Qingcheng.

"I can't bear it anymore… Hold me, please…"

The bones scattered like smoke. A new offering came forth to be sacrificed, but before he began, he brought the person he loved yet could not have to the throne. He had him sit in his lap and wrapped his arms around the man's neck, as if to absorb what little he could of a living person's warmth.

He nuzzled at him, brushing the tip of his nose against Xie Qingcheng's jaw and cheek; the curve of his brow and the ridge of his nose; the expanse of his brow…only to slowly, and with great reluctance, pull back. He stared into Xie Qingcheng's eyes, mere inches away, everything unsaid exchanged in their interlocked gaze.

Then he leaned forward to press his lips, cool and quivering, to Xie Qingcheng's.

Xie Qingcheng wanted to console him, to find his way back to reality beyond the nightmarish news He Yu had brought. He felt He Yu's mouth on his, again and again, each kiss falling on him like a soundless cry for help.

"It's all an ache inside my heart…Xie Qingcheng…" He Yu mumbled into his mouth between kisses. "It hurts… Do you know how much it hurts…?"

He Yu's emotions sank into Xie Qingcheng's chest. It wasn't just the pain of losing his father—there seemed to be a different kind of secret here, something far too heavy to bear.

Cupping Xie Qingcheng's face, he brought their foreheads together. "One last night, okay? Don't shut me out… Stay with me…"

Xie Qingcheng stared into his eyes. They were too close to see anything clearly, but he could hear the pounding of his heart, feel the shaking of He Yu's fingertips even in the dark.

"Xie Qingcheng, *please*…"

In the end, Xie Qingcheng didn't let He Yu finish his fragile entreaty. He put his hands to the back of his neck and held He Yu tight. They were

each other’s healing salve. It wasn’t just He Yu who needed Xie Qingcheng; sunk into useless confusion, Xie Qingcheng also needed He Yu. If He Yu was soon to become the He Group’s director, if the young He Yu was going to fade away into nothingness, never to return, then…

“Okay.”

His consent was low and hoarse, barely more audible than an exhale. But He Yu heard it nonetheless. He froze. Stinging heat filled the rims of his eyes. He kept mumbling Xie Qingcheng’s name, as if to bury all the loving words he’d ever be able to say into Xie Qingcheng’s heart this very night. Then, he captured Xie Qingcheng’s lips with his own with abandon, hesitation far behind him.

“Xie Qingcheng… Xie Qingcheng…”

His breathing came faster and faster. He kissed him with the fervor of a moth finally embracing the light of its flames.

Xie Qingcheng, Xie Qingcheng. I might never get to be He Yu again.

Let me hold my teddy bear one last time, okay?

You have to remember how tightly I held you, the same way I’ll remember all the warmth you ever gave me.

The storm raged on outside, plunging the world into cold misery.

In the deepest part of He Yu’s eyes, where Xie Qingcheng couldn’t see, a resolve solidified. He had reached a decision on some kind of goal, some kind of secret—but no one saw it, and no one knew.

He clutched at Xie Qingcheng, forcing those secrets down deep inside his heart. He didn’t want to think about anything anymore; he only wanted to feel Xie Qingcheng indulging him, even tinged as it was with resignation… To hide his own heartbreak, he picked up the man he loved, the one he might never be able to hold again, and took him to bed.

Xie Qingcheng blanked. All he’d been thinking of was holding He Yu all night to give him some solace; he hadn’t considered anything else. But now he understood. What He Yu wanted was much more—much crazier—than that.

One whole month. He’d lived in the He family residence on information lockdown—in the dark, in purgatory, surrounded by death and

confusion. Now, as everything settled, He Yu resembled someone who just crawled out of hell. He wanted to remember what it felt like to be alive; he wanted to feel living flesh and blood. He wanted Xie Qingcheng, wholly and without reservation.

That feeling was contagious. In the face of such fervent passion, Xie Qingcheng had nowhere to turn.

He Yu kissed him deeper and deeper, reaching the depths of his soul—as if what he wanted from Xie Qingcheng wasn't a hungry kiss, but the kind of salvation only he could give him.

He could see Xie Qingcheng's hesitation. He Yu grabbed Xie Qingcheng's fingers, rasping, "Don't put me back in hell… Just for one night, save me… Xie Qingcheng…" He pressed their brows together, interlocking their fingers. "Save me…" he whispered.

Under his fraught, miserable, maddened stare, the tension melted from Xie Qingcheng's body once again. Even though he, too, was bearing the weight of too many burdens; even though the news of He Jiwei's death had left him not at all in the mood; even though he knew his trail had once again gone cold and he was back at square one yet again, the He Yu in front of him was far too pathetic and pitiful. He knew He Yu only wanted something to help him forget reality for a time.

Something only Xie Qingcheng could give him.

"Save me…" He Yu whispered in his ear, more despair in his voice than desire.

Finally, Xie Qingcheng fell still. He looked at him for a few beats, then his hands twitched—as if giving unspoken permission. He Yu once again captured his lips in a feverish kiss.

Perhaps…the madman He Yu was the one in the right.

The kiss deepened further; clothes were slowly peeled off. The temperature inside the room rose.

Xie Qingcheng finally understood how this kind of heat—and this kind of heat alone—could banish the helplessness and torment in their hearts. The chill of death and separation was temporarily beaten away. It

was like the world was narrowed down to this little room, and all that remained in their eyes was each other.

He Yu looked down at Xie Qingcheng lying beneath him, stripped down to his calf-length black socks. A conflicted look brimmed in his eyes. “Ge,” he mumbled, “I’m sorry… This is probably…the last time for real…”

It was hardly a conscious admission. He Yu wasn’t fully lucid. He thought it was just a voice speaking at the bottom of his heart; he hadn’t realized Xie Qingcheng had heard. It was hardly the first time those words had been said between the two of them—in fact they’d been spoken too many times. But it had always been Xie Qingcheng who said “This is the last time,” never He Yu.

Xie Qingcheng didn’t know much of the business world or the dealings between these rich corporate families. He didn’t know why He Yu’s future caused him such a visceral fear. But when he heard the words leave his mouth, he understood that He Yu was serious this time.

It made sense. The director of a leading pharmaceuticals company couldn’t be tangled up with another man.

This would, in fact…be their last time.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. When He Yu drew close once more, he wrapped his arms around his neck. He wouldn’t think about it anymore, then… There was no need. Tonight, neither of them had to think about anything.

Just as they separated the two from the ferocious downpour outside, the apartment doors kept reality itself at bay. Both men knew what lay beyond those doors was a mess of blood and flesh; that this final night, before they ventured outside, was the last time they’d be able to hold each other this way.

Maybe none of Xie Qingcheng’s professed “last times” had been final, because Xie Qingcheng would always soften for He Yu in the end. But the one He Yu gave was, because he had already given up. Between them, it seemed as if Xie Qingcheng had the power to choose or refuse him—but the final arbiter was actually the young man himself. If He Yu drew things to a stop, what lay between them was truly over.

“Xie Qingcheng…” He kissed him, his breath searing hot.

They hadn’t done this in so long; Xie Qingcheng wasn’t used to it. He was too tight. He Yu took the bedside moisturizer Xie Xue and Xie Qingcheng shared to prep him.

Being fingered open was an uncomfortable sensation. Xie Qingcheng did his best to endure, but he couldn’t for very long. “Enough,” he rasped with great frustration once He Yu could fit a second finger inside with ease. “That’s…that’s enough…”

He Yu was no gentle lover in the first place, let alone when he had Xie Qingcheng flushed pink beneath him, urging him on. As he glanced down at him, he resisted the desire to bury himself in to the hilt. He opened the drawer in search of something.

“What are you looking for?”

“Condoms.”

“…I don’t have any.”

“Uh…”

Xie Qingcheng really had chosen thoughtless delirium. He pulled He Yu down and whispered against his mouth, in a raspy voice that at once commanded, instructed, and indulged. “You don’t need one. Just put it in.”

He Yu sucked in a breath, eyes darkening further. It didn’t matter how many times they did this—one word from Xie Qingcheng was enough to reduce him to a desperate virgin, impossibly hard, unable to keep his hands from shaking.

He fingered him roughly for a little while longer; Xie Qingcheng grunted, brows furrowing. The ointment melted into sticky wetness as he worked it, the sound of He Yu working him over becoming slick and audible, an echo of the lewd noises of actual sex.

“Enough… That’s enough, no more…” Xie Qingcheng threw back his head, cheeks red with a tantalizing flush. “Just…go ahead…ah—!”

He Yu didn’t let him ask a third time. He pulled out his glistening fingers and smeared them over his own painfully swollen cock before pressing its head to Xie Qingcheng’s pulsing little hole. Pushing forward, he slowly worked his dick into the passage that had brought him to the heights of bliss so many times before… But He Yu was far too large. The second

that formidable head pressed in, Xie Qingcheng's brows knit and his fingers shook.

"Relax…" panted He Yu. "Otherwise I can't put it in…"

He grabbed one of the pillows at the head of the bed and wedged it beneath Xie Qingcheng's hips for his comfort, but that was as much tenderness as he could muster. The next moment, he bent down over him with one hand on his hip, using the other to line himself up. Staring into Xie Qingcheng's face, pale with pain, he slowly shoved himself inside.

He could feel Xie Qingcheng twitching violently around him, as if his hole was wantonly sucking in his veiny cock—or stubbornly refusing the intrusion of another man. The rhythmic pulsing sent pleasure zipping through He Yu's abdomen, a prickling thrill he couldn't resist. Halfway through, the enchanting tightness eroded his willpower and patience. He lost all pretense of control; with a deep breath, he shoved himself to the hilt, driving his scalding dick deep into Xie Qingcheng's body, stretching him out as far as he could go.

"Ah—!" Xie Qingcheng's eyes flew wide; his vision swam. It was like He Yu had blown a fuse in his head. It hurt so much…

There wasn't enough lube and He Yu was too big and too thick; when he shoved his full, formidable length inside, it made Xie Qingcheng feel like it would rupture through his stomach.

"Does it hurt?" Sheathed, He Yu reached out to touch Xie Qingcheng's abdomen. He was already helplessly pressing himself forward, moving in short and urgent little thrusts. Pleasure left him breathless, and as he rocked himself into Xie Qingcheng he said, "I'll be gentler…"

But it didn't matter if He Yu was gentle—when that huge dick moved inside Xie Qingcheng, even the tiniest shift was enough to make gooseflesh break out over his whole body. He couldn't endure it anymore, but he wasn't used to asking for mercy in bed—so he pulled He Yu down and leaned up to kiss him wildly, hoping to distract himself from the pain.

That was a fatal mistake. The intensity of the kiss stoked the flames of He Yu's thirst; he lost all control as he grabbed Xie Qingcheng's wrists and pinned them to the bed, their tongues grappling for dominance. He Yu

drove himself mercilessly into Xie Qingcheng's body, pulling out almost halfway on every thrust before slamming himself home.

The rhythmic sound of flesh on flesh echoed through the cramped room. The old wooden bed frame creaked. He Yu licked feverishly into Xie Qingcheng's mouth, reaching down to wrap his hand around Xie Qingcheng's dick and tugging it roughly. The clash of this sudden pleasure in front alongside the pain from behind was more than Xie Qingcheng could bear. He couldn't stand being totally at someone else's mercy like this; after another vicious thrust, he suddenly flipped the both of them—still connected—in the space between He Yu's panting breaths.

"Xie-ge…you…"

Xie Qingcheng said nothing. Now atop He Yu, he lowered his head, brows furrowing, and slowly tried to swivel his own hips.

"Mngh…"

By their torsos alone, it would appear that He Yu was the one being fucked—after all, Xie Qingcheng was on top of him. But the whole scene was another story. Xie Qingcheng's slender legs were forced apart and dangling at He Yu's hips, his perky ass swaying slightly as his hole worked up and down on the imposing length buried inside him.

It was a more comfortable position; now that he was in control of the pace, Xie Qingcheng wasn't in as much pain anymore. He slowly ground down on He Yu, taking him deep—but he wasn't trying to torment He Yu the way he had in the past. Not too fast, but not too slow, either.

It felt good for He Yu too, and the sight of Xie Qingcheng on top of him, brows knitted and hips gyrating, was so enthralling that he could gladly give up some control in exchange for the novelty of this thrill. He gasped for breath as Xie Qingcheng moved, offering up his unreserved reactions to show him the bliss he was feeling. He moved his broad hands up Xie Qingcheng's waist and back, burying his fingers into Xie Qingcheng's hair and tightening his grip.

"Fuck… Ge, you're so good at riding me… Harder, won't you?" He Yu was lost in the pleasure of it, thrusting his hips upward to meet Xie Qingcheng's rhythm, burying himself deeper. He grabbed Xie Qingcheng's hair and pulled him down into a lingering kiss. The sound of flesh hitting

flesh echoed louder, and the heat of their skin against skin burned hotter. Xie Qingcheng's movements became wilder as something wet and slick seeped out from where they were joined.

"It feels so good…" He Yu relished the feeling of Xie Qingcheng riding him, the sensation of Xie Qingcheng's wet hole pulsing hungrily around him. He swallowed, the jut of his throat bobbing as rationality left his brain. "You make me feel so good… Xie Qingcheng… Xie Qingcheng…"

He couldn't hold himself back anymore. He sat up, catching Xie Qingcheng off guard—he didn't realize the new angle would push He Yu even deeper inside him.

"Ah—!" He'd been holding himself back the entire time, but this sudden thrust, much deeper than he ever could've imagined or felt before—a sensation even sharper than prostate stimulation—brought pleasure crashing down on him like the tide, drowning out the pain of another man's intrusion. Xie Qingcheng couldn't hold back anymore, eyes flying open as he wailed loudly. "Ah…ah…"

His eyes were glassy.

Xie Qingcheng had a rough idea of what this was—an erogenous zone very difficult to reach during sex because of how deep it was. Very few people got to experience that kind of sensation, but He Yu had reached it. An indescribable madness engulfed Xie Qingcheng utterly. Slick poured out of him, wetly savoring the massive length wreaking havoc inside his body.

Sparks blurred his vision. He could hardly tell the difference between day and night anymore; He Yu had fucked him to orgasm already, the charging waves of pleasure reducing him to thoughtless spasms and cries.

He'd never…felt anything like this…

This final time was also their most amorous entanglement.

As if they knew this was a final separation—that after tonight, their families, social status, responsibilities…would all become the deepest chasms between them, that they'd never be able to embrace again—their most primal desires were utterly unleashed. Knowledge drove them into a maddened embrace.

Xie Qingcheng's mind was entirely blank. He Yu kept rutting into that spot that was deeper and more sensitive than even his prostate; he shuddered in He Yu's arms, crying out and shaking. Tears dripped from his face.

"Fuck me," he mumbled, on the verge of delirium. His lashes were wet with tears and his eyes were completely unfocused as he wept in utter abandon. He kept murmuring those words, slick pink lips quivering as He Yu fucked him—perhaps out of lust, or perhaps there was something else behind it. Again and again, like a tattered doll puppeted by pleasure: "Fuck me… Ah…"

He Yu's eyes were wet too. He wrapped his arms around the man desperately trying to move his hips on top of him and reached up to kiss the jut of his throat and the line of his jaw. His hands roamed hungrily along his back. He panted for breath, embracing Xie Qingcheng madly and passionately as he aimed for that spot that made Xie Qingcheng convulse helplessly around him.

"I'll fuck you to death," he grunted. "Xie Qingcheng…you deserve it… See how tightly you're sucking me in… See how wet and sloppy you are? You're leaking in the front too—I've fucked you 'til you're dripping, know that? Fuck… Feels so good… Squeeze me harder…"

"Ahh…ah…" Xie Qingcheng shuddered above him, jostled like a rider atop a tireless horse. "Faster… Ah… Ah… He Yu…ah!"

His second orgasm came too quickly and too hard. He hadn't recovered at all, his mind already on the precipice. Another spurt of thin fluid gushed from his pretty dick, spilling between their scalding abdomens.

"Fuck… What a slut…" Dizzy, He Yu picked up the still-overwhelmed Xie Qingcheng and got off the bed. Holding him up against the side, he pulled his too-hard cock out of Xie Qingcheng's tightly furled hole.

"Hah…" Losing the constant overstimulation to his sensitive spot mid-orgasm, Xie Qingcheng grew even more delirious. He gasped for breath, clenching up around nothing. "Mngh…"

His body had grown accustomed to the way He Yu treated him. After going so long without, it would be a lie to say that this sudden bout,

reaching deeper inside him than ever before, wasn't pleasurable. When He Yu pulled out, slick poured from Xie Qingcheng, and the wetness was still dripping from his hole. Xie Qingcheng couldn't take it anymore. He reached out, unthinking, for his own cock, but He Yu grabbed his wrist.

"No," he said. "Every time…every time you come tonight, I want it to be…on my cock. You don't get to touch yourself…"

He turned Xie Qingcheng around so his back was pressed to He Yu's scalding chest. From behind, he pinned him down against the bed like an animal.

"Arch your back." He Yu grabbed Xie Qingcheng's shaking legs and forced him into an even more humiliating position. Xie Qingcheng was still too dazed to register any of it; his head lay against the mattress, his hair a mess around his face. His cheeks were flushed and dripping sweat, his lips parted as he panted for breath.

He Yu watched him like this…watched this beautiful sight he'd never been blessed with before…and fell only deeper. His heart throbbed in greater adoration and agony both. He closed his eyes, banishing the shadows of reality to drown once more in sex that felt like it was at the end of the world. He grabbed his cock and pressed it back to Xie Qingcheng's licentious hole. It'd been fucked loose already, and now it was clenching in anticipation, welcoming him back in. His Xie-ge… He'd trained his Xie-ge so well, but after this, he'd never get to touch him again…

When He Yu's eyes opened again, they were scarlet—with lust, dissatisfaction, pain, and clinging attachment. The emotions battered at his rationality, and his dismal etiquette in bed deteriorated further. With one hand on his dick, he merely nudged at Xie Qingcheng without pushing in, the other hand roaming around his partner's sturdy waist.

"Xie Qingcheng," he said, touching him still, rubbing his cockhead all around his sloppy entrance. "Do you want me…? Do you want me… inside?"

He pushed the tip of it in—slightly more. His hips pistoned against him, nudging in circles and threatening Xie Qingcheng's already vulnerable mind. Then, with a wet plop, he pulled back out. Xie Qingcheng jolted, hands fisting the bedsheets.

He Yu bent, letting the heat of his breath trace the back of Xie Qingcheng's ears. "Do you want me…? Xie Qingcheng…do you…" For some reason, his voice took on a tearful quality. "Do you need me? Do you want me…"

He was only mumbling to himself; he didn't expect Xie Qingcheng to give any sort of reply.

But perhaps because both of them had lost their better judgment—or perhaps Xie Qingcheng heard the heartbreak in He Yu's voice and subconsciously wanted to comfort this sad, pitiful little boy—in that stormy night, He Yu heard the words issue from Xie Qingcheng's mouth, his head against the pillow and his eyes unfocused: "Need…you…"

It struck home. In that instant, he felt his heart cave in.

Tile and gravel came crashing down, the impact thudding through his chest. He Yu almost thought he misheard.

But Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes and murmured again, "I need you…"

The light in He Yu's eyes shuddered violently. He even forgot to be cruel; he reached out to cup Xie Qingcheng's sweat-soaked, red-flushed face. "Xie Qingcheng…what did you say…? Say that again."

No answer came.

"Say that again, won't you…"

But Xie Qingcheng was slowly coming back to his senses. His vision cleared, and as his eyes regained focus, he buried the emotions that had just slipped out back down. He didn't want He Yu to know what he was feeling, so he subsumed that earlier intensity into lust. He reached out to take He Yu's hand. He'd never done anything so forward, let alone something so lewd in bed. Though he was doing it in part to hide his true feelings, he did truly want it. He wanted the same way anyone—any normal person, any living person—would want.

"I said, I want you to put it in, He Yu." Xie Qingcheng's voice was low and raspy, mature yet inexperienced. It sounded like a lofty command, but the words were unbearably filthy. The rims of his eyes were red and his voice was shaking. "…I want you to fuck me. Harder."

Perhaps that was the only way he could banish this pathetic reality from his head.

It was a much easier slide when He Yu pushed in again. Xie Qingcheng's hole was so wet he sheathed himself right to the hilt with a wet plop.

"Ah!" Xie Qingcheng wailed. Slick gushed. His softness hungrily welcomed the other man's cock, sucking him in with abandon. He Yu was panting. Self-control was beyond him now. He shoved Xie Qingcheng down on the bed and began a frenzied assault.

"Ah…ahh…" That emptiness was finally filled. This was the fullness Xie Qingcheng's still-throbbing sensitive spot craved, the fullness that only another man could give him.

He Yu ground himself against that spot and Xie Qingcheng arched his back and threw back his head, his delicate shoulder blades shifting beneath his skin. He could hardly breathe—he felt like he was being fucked to death. His hips were shaking, grinding back to meet He Yu's thrusts.

"Faster…ah…"

"Is it good? Xie Qingcheng…do you feel good?"

The air between the two of them was blisteringly hot. Their eyesight, their heartbeats, their breaths…everything seemed to melt in the heat of it. In the end they were both drenched in sweat, a scalding slickness that dissolved the boundaries between their bodies, every movement more intense as that primal rhythm beat on.

He Yu bent to kiss the crook of Xie Qingcheng's neck. When he sucked on the red cinnabar mole there, Xie Qingcheng arched his neck—He Yu reached forward, kneading roughly at his chest, his abdomen, and then gently tugging his cock.

"You're hard again. With me, this time, okay…?"

He Yu was close too, now. His thrusts grew more and more frenzied as the heat of passion spiked between their bodies dyeing both Xie Qingcheng's cheeks and He Yu's eyes scarlet. He Yu worked his hips tirelessly, fucking him fast and viciously—so fast that the cream and slick

that dripped out of Xie Qingcheng became a white froth, quivering around his hole as they rocked together.

“Ah…ah…”

Xie Qingcheng had lost his voice. Together they had found his most sensitive spot; fucking him there so deeply would leave even his scalp numb and prickling. As pleasure engulfed him, his senses became more acute. He twitched and clenched around He Yu, desperately trying to please the burning length inside him. He didn’t understand how the boy’s cock could bring him such abnormal ecstasy… He’d never imagined this could happen…

He Yu was still pounding into him, faster and faster, hot and wet. It felt as if he had actually pierced him through; Xie Qingcheng’s stomach ached, but somehow, terrifyingly, it still felt good. A hint of pain enhanced the suffocating pleasure, stoking the flames of his lust higher and higher. His dick, ground against the bedsheets, grew harder. Xie Qingcheng’s toes curled.

It was far too much…

“Not yet…” He Yu rasped. “Wait for me.”

Just as Xie Qingcheng was about to come, He Yu seized his shaft just beneath the head and denied him. Xie Qingcheng couldn’t breathe. His hands tightened around the sheets. He was on the verge of total breakdown.

“He Yu…let go,” he begged. “Let me come… It hurts…”

“Just a little longer, it’ll feel so good… I want you to feel good with me,” He Yu husked by his ear, slamming into him harder and harder. Every thrust was quick and powerful, driving Xie Qingcheng’s own slick back into him and filling the room with the sound of squelching. “With me…”

His gaze was utterly bestial. Xie Qingcheng couldn’t see it like this, on all fours beneath him, but he could feel He Yu’s shaft swelling to an almost unbearable size inside him. It filled him up completely, taking up every last inch of space. The imposing length of it was webbed with veins; Xie Qingcheng could almost feel them pulsing on every thrust. They throbbed as He Yu moved faster inside him, ready to—

There was terror. Real terror—he was instinctively afraid of being filled with come, especially when he could feel the burning heat of He Yu holding him from behind, biting his neck and licking the shell of his ear. “Ge,” he said throatily, “I’m close…”

But this time, despite the horror of being pumped full by another man—and a young one at that—Xie Qingcheng only shut his eyes tight and restrained the urge to flee. Panting, he gave the youth on top of him the permission that could only come from an elder. “You…can…come inside… Ah!”

Of course that drove He Yu insane. After the initial shock passed, he pinned him down with a furious snarl—as if to tear open his flesh and merge their souls through their union, taking all that was his. He fucked him ferociously, pounding that spot that made Xie Qingcheng clench down tight. “Fuck, you’re such a slut,” he hissed. “Want it? You want another man’s come? Here…Xie Qingcheng…all for you, I’ll fuck you to death…”

After a dozen more strokes, He Yu came like the breaking of a dam. Spurt after spurt of virile come drenched Xie Qingcheng’s sensitive spot as if He Yu were trying to make a woman squirt.

“Ah—ah…!” Xie Qingcheng broke down instantly. Every gush of He Yu’s release splattering against that spot that he’d abused all night reduced him to shivers. It was too much—it felt scalding inside him, the wet heat pouring into his body and making him feel like his stomach was being pumped full. “Ah…He Yu…ah… It’s too much…too much…ah…!”

He threw back his head, eyes wet with tears, and cried—because He Yu was still grinding into him as he came. It felt incomprehensible, unbearable; Xie Qingcheng’s vision went white and his mind went black, all his senses narrowing down to that violent pleasure.

“Ah…”

He came in a ruined mess. He’d come so many times there wasn’t anything left, but he still let it out, thinned fluid spilling against the sheets. He Yu had fucked him to orgasm again and again; he’d come so intensely just from He Yu’s cock…

Xie Qingcheng shook as he released, tightening further like an insatiable mouth sucking passionately on the length that’d driven him to the

heights of ecstasy.

“Ah…ah…” Tears slid from Xie Qingcheng’s eyes. The fucking was over, but those thoughtless whimpers wouldn’t stop.

He Yu panted for breath. He was in total bliss; his release had done nothing to quell his desire to possess Xie Qingcheng. He refused to pull out, still moving slowly inside him through that mess of slick and come, plugging that clenching hole up tight so not one drop would leak out. In the wake of all that passion, he kept on grinding into him, kissing him, and nuzzling his earlobe.

“Xie Qingcheng,” he murmured, “I love it when you’re like this… I wish I could stay like this…forever…”

No response came.

“I could stay in the darkness of night forever, if only I had you… I don’t need morning to come…”

The rain outside became a natural curtain. Soaked by the downpour and the thunder, his ragged voice was incomprehensible.

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Chapter 182:
I’m the New Executive He

IT WAS A NIGHT of unrestrained passion. Both men were weighed down by different burdens, and each could sense the shadow cast on the other—so they unleashed themselves almost in vengeance against fate, in retaliation for what they had no choice but to endure. The bed creaked endlessly under the rhythmic shaking of the mattress; by the time it all settled, like fading ripples on water, it was almost dawn.

Xie Qingcheng wasn’t in the best health, but he had a sense that this was a necessary indulgence, that he deserved this chance to escape the fetters of society, fate, and his own conscience. In the rumbling thunder that mirrored the sound of heavenly punishment, he seemed to be railing against some kind of intangible force—he wanted this frenzied embrace, even if it hurt him to the bone.

He Yu defied the bounds of society by nature, but Xie Qingcheng was different. Xie Qingcheng was someone who grew up according to the rules and rigor of expected behavior—but he was fiercer than anything when he chose to defy them. His outbursts were silent, but they were destructive and thoughtless, as if the future was no more significant than dust.

But day came nonetheless.

When the sky began to brighten, Xie Qingcheng was woken from his slumber by a faint sound. He opened his eyes to find He Yu lying beside him. He didn’t know when He Yu had woken up, or if the younger man had slept at all. He Yu held him. Beneath the thin comforter, they embraced, and his dark almond eyes were fixed quietly upon him. Outside, it was still drizzling. It was the barest edge of dawn—morning had not yet come.

They looked at each other. “When do you leave?” asked Xie Qingcheng. His voice was low and rough.

“Daybreak.”

Xie Qingcheng made a noise of assent. He wanted to say something, but he couldn’t find anything he wanted to say.

This was the first ever time that their “morning after” had been so serene and peaceful. Neither was willing to be the first to break it. In truth, Xie Qingcheng hadn’t ever pampered He Yu this much either. When He Yu moved to hold him tighter, Xie Qingcheng frowned—he was still inside him. He could feel the pressure of him when He Yu moved, and the sticky release inside him rippling with the motion.

It hurt, but Xie Qingcheng didn’t chide him.

He Yu clung to him, their legs still entangled beneath the blanket. Their heartbeats thrummed through their sweat-soaked chests, through to each other’s sternum. He Yu held him like that for a long time, as if they were already two old men at the end of their respective lives, with no need to think of anything else.

“Xie Qingcheng,” he said softly. “I want to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“Did you ever like me? Even if just for one day?”

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

“One hour?” He Yu ran his hand through his hair and was silent for a long moment. Dissatisfied and yet self-deprecating, he asked again. “…Or even one second?”

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes.

He was covered in the marks left by He Yu’s mouth; his body was still clenching around the length of another man, something that shouldn’t have been inside his own equally masculine body. His heart was as soft as the rest of him, but it was also as unyielding as his spine of steel.

After a long, dragging silence, he heard He Yu chuckle. “I’m sorry,” he said, next to his ear. “I was asking for too much. I know that’s not something you can give me.”

He Yu paused, taking the phone left by his pillow and turning on the portable projector. Dim blue light shone on the ceiling; it was a video of drifting jellyfish shadows on the ocean floor, one he’d made himself.

He let go of Xie Qingcheng and looked into his eyes. “What you’ve given me was already wonderful. I know that’s all you have. I know you were still good to me, Xie Qingcheng. I don’t blame you.”

In this room that was as silent as the bottom of the sea, He Yu kissed Xie Qingcheng once more. The kiss deepened as his passion rose; he brought Xie Qingcheng into his arms again, body moving beneath the blankets. He Yu pushed his hips forward again and again, the length that had remained inside Xie Qingcheng's body all night stiffening once more—becoming hotter and harder, burying into the wetness of his hole.

"Ah…ah…"

Xie Qingcheng's brows furrowed and his neck arched back, his legs dangling at He Yu's waist and moving limply with his thrusts. He Yu fucked him, slowly and gently at first, gradually moving faster and hungrier. He couldn't hold himself back anymore; by the end, he was shoving into him in a frenzy, as if to break Xie Qingcheng apart.

Though Xie Qingcheng's pain tolerance was very high, for some reason the sensation left tears in his eyes. His breaths hitched.

Before day broke, both of them embraced once again. As Xie Qingcheng was taken more and more forcefully, shattered noises spilled from his throat.

He might've been mistaken, but in this entanglement that felt like they were living through the end of the world, He Yu seemed to hear this older man—when fucked to delirium, voice breaking—mumble, "…He Yu…you…you…can finish inside. Don't pull out. Keep it all inside."

If this is the last thing I can give you; if this is the last thing you can keep. Even if it's debauched, I want to engrave it upon my memory.

The next time he awoke, He Yu was gone.

It was morning in earnest now, and the rain had stopped. He Yu seemed like a lonely dragon that arrived only during the storm, and once it ceased, that foggy warmth vanished like morning mist. Xie Qingcheng lay in the mess of his bed, staring up at the ceiling in distress. He knew He Yu had decided to take up the family business. That willful, death-defying love would probably never return.

This was the outcome he'd hoped for all this time. At last he had what he wanted, one weight lifted from his shoulders. He should've felt

relieved.

Xie Qingcheng sat up briefly. Faint sunlight filtered in through the window onto his pallid skin. The window wasn't fully closed, and a breeze drifted in. The last of his warmth had left with He Yu, and now nothing was left.

Xie Qingcheng was very tired. He lay back down, and he didn't rise for a very long time.

At ten in the morning, he received a notification from the city's official news account. The first thing he saw was the black-and-white obituary photo, followed by the news that one of the top businessmen in the country, He Jiwei, was dead.

After that was the live broadcast press conference. The location, time, and invited members of the media had all been decided by the He family in advance.

Xie Qingcheng watched as this boy, who only hours ago had been clumsily holding him like a little cub, calmly and composedly answered questions from the press. He'd changed into black formal wear, and a red-eyed Lü Zhishu was standing behind him. In the corner of the screen, still looking shell-shocked, was He Li.

On the display, He Yu's name was appended with the words 'Successor to the He Group.'

It was really very strange. This was clearly just a little boy who would wrap his arms around him and say, *Xie Qingcheng, won't you hold me?*

But the young Executive He onscreen was refined, elegant, beautiful, and well-spoken. The edges of his almond eyes were tinged red, the picture of grief portrayed to perfection. It was exactly what the reporters wanted to capture and a detail the audience would want to analyze, and above all, it was the facade of filial harmony that the He family would want publicized. He Yu had never been officially trained in public relations, but he had always been clever, and he picked it up very well.

“With my mother’s support, I will work to ensure the projects I’ve taken over are implemented smoothly,” he said.

“Most of the He family’s unfinished projects are overseas,” said one reporter. “Does that mean you’ll be out of the country frequently, Executive He…?”

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He Yu sat calmly at the solid wood desk, fine-boned hands folded. “Yes.”

“You haven’t yet finished your studies. How do you plan to balance your schoolwork and the family business?”

“I plan to request a one-year leave of absence from school. It’s true that I’m still very young and lack experience in a lot of areas, but I must focus all my efforts on the business. The seniors who have worked with my father for years, as well as my mother and my brother—they’ve given me the greatest of support, and I will not disappoint them. Once the business has settled into its usual operations, I will return to school and complete my degree.”

“Off topic,” said a reporter. “But Executive He, your current major is writing and directing, not pharmacology. Was this decision fully based on personal interest? Or was this what your parents wanted?”

This time, He Yu paused a little. He lowered his lashes, fiddling with his thumbs as he considered the question. When he looked into the closest camera lens, his eyes were so piercing they seemed to find their way beyond the LED screen and to someone in particular.

“When I was very little, someone once told me never to succumb in the face of suffering. The strength of your internal conviction is more important than medication. I always thought I’d applied for Huzhou University’s writing and directing major for a different reason, but I’ve slowly come to understand it was because I’ve always held what he said in my heart.

“Sometimes, the strength of one’s internal conviction can be much more powerful than any drug. If I succeed in this field, I might be able to put the catalyst of my conviction on screen. If someone understands it—if anyone who feels trapped can take strength and encouragement from my work, no matter how little, that will be deeply meaningful to me.”

It had to be said—He Yu’s aura was perfect for such elegant conversations in front of the camera. He might’ve been very young, and completely insane in private, but here, his charisma was far above the likes of Lü Zhishu and He Li. Neither of them would be able to produce such an effect in his place.

“Will you share who it was, Executive He?” asked the reporter. “Your father, or…”

“That’s a secret of mine,” said He Yu, gentle but firm.

His voice rang out from the Wei family’s television, Auntie Li’s phone, Zheng Jingfeng’s computer screen, and Duan Wen’s device in Australia…as well as the little room in Moyu Alley.

“And a secret I will keep for him.”

On a certain island off the coast of Australia, Duan Wen watched the screen with his legs crossed. “How much did he take to be able to stay so calm?”

The hologram of Anthony, He Yu’s new personal doctor, answered: “Can I say it’s a fatal dose?”

Duan Wen paused. “He won’t die, will he?”

“He’s pulled through, so he will survive. Too bad his Mister Secret was busy investigating Wei Rong while He Yu was breaking down, so he had no idea how hard that month was for him… But as soon as He Yu got better, he ran off to see him.” Anthony snorted. “What a psycho. No one normal could endure Xie Qingcheng—forget liking him, just living with him is enough to drive you insane. Only a madman would relish that kind of treatment.”

“Don’t say it like that,” Duan Wen said idly. “There are some things you wouldn’t understand.”

Anthony couldn’t talk back to Executive Duan. But in the hologram, his expression twisted. “But he’s given up on him now, hasn’t he? His father died, and he’s the only one in the family who can take up the mantle. Thank goodness he’s not lost his mind—imagine if he threw everything away just to stand with Xie Qingcheng.”

Duan Wen studied the screen. After a long beat, he gave a dispassionate reply. “Let’s hope that is indeed the case.”

Half an hour later, the press conference ended.

The web page stayed open on Xie Qingcheng’s phone. He didn’t click out of it.

He reached up, arm covering his brow.

Xie Xue, Chen Man…He Yu.

The three juniors he’d practically worried himself bald over had somehow, as he wished, all embarked on journeys of their own.

As if his prayers had finally been heard, the heavens had eased his burdens.

The tattered little teddy bear closed his eyes—he knew he could march forward without misgivings now. He could use the last of his strength to repay what Qin Ciyan had done for him, and then, if he could… he would track down the person who killed his parents.

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Chapter 183:
Do You Suspect Me?

NOW THAT HE DIDN'T have any juniors to distract him, Xie Qingcheng was much more efficient with his work.

He did research and investigated every day, going to Meiyu periodically for treatment. His sense of pain slowly faded away. He was living more and more like a machine, so of course he couldn't feel much.

Some time later, the information he'd collected led him to another important discovery. As he was investigating every employee who'd worked at He Jiwei's lab back then, a new revelation shocked him to the core.

When Lü Zhishu was pregnant with He Yu, she'd accidentally contracted an infection while helping her husband He Jiwei with his lab. It was serious enough to risk needing an abortion, and they'd had no choice but to use RN-13 to try and save the child…and the lab the incident occurred in had been led by none other than Wei Rong!

Xie Qingcheng never could've imagined Wei Rong and Lü Zhishu having this kind of interaction—the kind of thing that could even form a grudge. Not long after Lü Zhishu accepted the RN-13 treatment, Wei Rong had her accident and passed away. Strangely enough, though, all these years later, Lü Zhishu seemed to have no interest whatsoever in RN-13, this forbidden drug that had changed her life.

The night Xie Qingcheng discovered these facts, he sat at his desk and smoked like a chimney. He analyzed all the possibilities, listed out all the potential outcomes, and filled his ashtray to the brim.

In the end, he rose and walked out to the alley, worn down by everything. He lit another cigarette.

Behind him, his desk lamp shone on a page of paper covered in his own writing. Most conspicuous was the conclusion he'd come to, one he was loath to accept but had to acknowledge had the most potential after all others were eliminated—

Lü Zhishu had never given up on researching RN-13.

A few days after Xie Qingcheng discovered this clue, Zheng Jingfeng suddenly invited him over to his place for dinner. He said there was something very important he wanted to share.

So Xie Qingcheng went downtown to the studio he lived in. By the time he arrived, Zheng Jingfeng had set up a little ethanol stove cooking braised pork ribs. On the table was stir-fried eggs with tomato, smoked fish, bok choy and tofu soup, as well as two bottles of erguotou liquor; an array of homestyle dishes.

Braised pork ribs made on an ethanol camping stove had that special taste regular pork ribs didn't. Zheng Jingfeng took off his apron and wiped his hands, turning to Xie Qingcheng. "Sit. When you came to the police department when you were little, this was your favorite thing to eat. Braised pork ribs made on the camping stove in my office, just like your dad used to make. C'mere, let's have a drink."

"Is there a reason you invited me over?"

The topic seemed to cause a great deal of difficulty for Zheng Jingfeng. He tugged Xie Qingcheng over to the dinner table and poured a little cup of erguotou for them both. Then he took his chopsticks and stared at the dishes, thinking about what to say. "Have some food," he said in the end. "Let's talk as we eat."

Once Xie Qingcheng had taken a few bites, Zheng Jingfeng finally started talking. Xie Qingcheng realized now why he had asked him to eat first—it was because what he had to say robbed him of any appetite whatsoever.

"After Jiang Liping's death, we've been doing our best to patch holes in the case. The highway explosion came out of nowhere and she didn't have time to tell us everything, nor was there anything left behind at the scene. However, she did help us answer certain questions, and gave us a better direction to look in." Zheng Jingfeng took a sip and smacked his lips. "I know the identity of the biggest 'agent' in the precinct, and the less he wants us to investigate something, the more I'm going to dig into it. Do you know what I found? In one of Huang Zhilong's personal villas, I found a leather-bound notebook."

“Huang Zhilong’s notes?”

“Jiang Liping’s.” Zheng Jingfeng took another gulp, then refilled his cup. In a toast to the fallen woman, he slowly poured it onto the ground. “Other people might have thought it belonged to Huang Zhilong, but I’d know my informant’s handwriting anywhere…”

Xie Qingcheng furrowed his brow. “She was wearing the secrecy bracelet. Even if she was only writing about it, there’s no way she could record anything particularly important.”

“That’s right,” said Zheng Jingfeng. “But her notes were compiled to test which secrets she absolutely could not speak of, and what she could hint at in code. There were a lot of codes she used in the notebook; I’ve spent the past few months dissecting them.”

“What did you find?”

“There’s a lot of exceedingly valuable information. Jiang Liping was a formidable woman. Even after her death, she’s given us some priceless clues. We’ve triangulated evidence that matches her coded hints almost perfectly, and we’re pretty sure we can pinpoint Duan Wen’s domestic coconspirators. Apart from the deceased Huang Zhilong, Liang Jicheng and Wang Jiankang, there are a few academicians, corrupt government officials, and key entrepreneurs.”

“How many?”

“There are four that perfectly match the known information whose identities we’ve confirmed, but none of them are particularly high up the hierarchy—they’re all much lower than Huang Zhilong. However, we’ve identified one target who’s as important as Huang Zhilong, heading a company high up in the organization. At present, it’s about a 60 percent match with the information we have, which means this company is very likely to be the other key leader Jiang Liping mentioned. It’s contributed no less than Zhilong Entertainment—perhaps even more, because they’re responsible for developing and conducting biochemical experiments with forbidden drugs. A pharmaceuticals company.”

Xie Qingcheng went pale. His hand, tight around the cup, was shaking. Though Zheng Jingfeng hadn’t said the name yet, Xie Qingcheng knew in his gut with certainty which pharmaceuticals company he was

talking about—why else would Zheng Jingfeng feel the need to call him over for a personal conversation over its involvement?

He didn't want to hear him say it, and so he spoke first, staring into Zheng Jingfeng's eyes and cutting right to the chase. "Which one? He Pharmaceuticals?"

Zheng Jingfeng downed his cup. "You hit the nail on the head. In her coded notebook, Jiang Liping identified the company as Duan Wen's biggest biochemicals partner in China. Their honorable overseas ventures are just a smokescreen—the bulk of their operations involve the research and sale of banned drugs. In the past few years, the company has provided massive quantities of unethical and unregulated drugs to Duan Wen's gray markets overseas. They don't care how much illness or death they cause; all they want is the data that comes from testing these drugs on human subjects."

It was the height of summer, and the miserly Lao-Zheng had the AC off, leaving only the fan spinning wobbily around. But the sweat that had broken out on Xie Qingcheng's skin was a cold one. Zheng Jingfeng paused for a moment, staring into Xie Qingcheng's bloodless face across the virtually untouched table of homestyle cuisine.

"Normally, I wouldn't share details of police findings with you," he said. "That's a principle I stick to. But I've made an exception this time because I can tell you and that Xiao-He… Well, I should be calling him Executive He now. You and Executive He are very close. Based on what I see, you're closer with him than you are with Chen Yan, even."

Xie Qingcheng put down his cup, faintly dizzy. He did his best to keep calm. "He Yu isn't that kind of person."

"I hope he isn't, too, but everyone changes—especially when they can't get something they want. When He Jiwei was still alive, the corporate structure of He Pharmaceuticals was split into domestic operations, managed by him, and overseas operations, managed by Lü Zhishu. He Jiwei wasn't involved in most of the overseas dealings. If the He Group is the company Jiang Liping was talking about, then based on their corporate structure, the only person with the possibility of exoneration is He Jiwei." Zheng Jingfeng paused. "He Yu is different."

Xie Qingcheng thought over the clues he'd gathered—there was a high possibility that Lü Zhishu never gave up on researching RN-13 at all. When he connected that to what Zheng Jingfeng was saying, that it was Lü Zhishu who'd been overseeing the He Group's overseas distribution, it seemed very likely…

"I'm sure you've seen the news," said Zheng Jingfeng. "Young Executive He isn't like his dad; since he took his father's place, he's been handling everything personally, even the overseas projects his dad only ever put his stamp of approval on. Everyone's talking about how the tragedy shocked his mother and took a toll on her health—if He Yu wasn't making sure she's being well taken care of, she wouldn't be starting to recover. From what I know, Executive Lü and the young Executive He have never been particularly close—but since his father's death, he's become quite attentive toward his mother. That doesn't align with the young man's usual modus operandi at all. Why do you think that is?"

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. "He's lost his father. Maybe he doesn't want to lose his mother as well."

"You know that's not the reason."

"…Lü Zhishu has been trying to make amends to He Yu for a long time, but He Yu never gave her the chance. Now, her mental state and her health are both failing. He Yu doesn't bully the weak; it's not completely out of character for him to choose to do this."

"Then let's assume you're right and that's one potential reason. But hear me out on another."

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

"After He Jiwei's death, He Yu inherited all the status and assets that He Jiwei had sole ownership over—but He Jiwei and Lü Zhishu basically had equal ownership of the He Group. The two of them could maintain an equilibrium, but He Yu is a junior. I doubt his mother and his little brother are as happy about his stake as they're putting on, and I'm sure He Yu is well aware of that fact. Choosing to take control of almost all the overseas dealings the He Group has is probably a calculated move to make sure he'll have Executive Lü by the throat before she recovers."

Lao-Zheng stopped there for a moment. “I’ve only met that young man a few times,” he added, “but I can tell he’s nowhere close to as approachable as he pretends to be. He’s capable of great ruthlessness and risk-taking; he’s not the kind of regular boy who’d willingly submit to someone else’s control. In a fight for control against his mother, he’s perfectly capable of organizing a coup to take power for himself.”

“That is what He Yu is like,” Xie Qingcheng conceded. He looked up at Zheng Jingfeng. “But there’s one thing you’ve overlooked.”

“What is it?”

“He’s not cruel, and he would never use drugs to hurt those who are sick.”

Zheng Jingfeng said nothing.

“He risked his life running into a burning building to save the ill at Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital,” Xie Qingcheng insisted. “Don’t you remember?”

Zheng Jingfeng was silent for a beat. “If I wasn’t certain he’s taken control of all the international projects, I wouldn’t come to this conclusion either. Yes, I remember him rescuing those patients. But, Xie Qingcheng, let me repeat myself—people change. Especially when there’s something they want very badly.”

Xie Qingcheng watched Zheng Jingfeng peaceably. “In that regard, it’s very unlikely that he would,” he said.

“Why do you put so much faith in him?”

“Because I believe I understand him.” The food was tasteless in Xie Qingcheng’s mouth. He rose. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll be heading home.”

Zheng Jingfeng stood with him. He turned to Xie Qingcheng, who was already at the entryway. “You can’t trust him too much. All these clues point to him—all the evidence suggests he’s not what he seems. You can’t let sentiment cloud your judgment…”

“I haven’t. I came to this conclusion as a result of rational analysis.” Xie Qingcheng slanted a look back at him. “Lao-Zheng, it’s true that I don’t want to stand against him, and that I don’t want to lose faith in him. But if

one day it comes to light that he did do what you're saying, that he's committed such acts—if it's confirmed that he was the one behind it—"

He paused, his amber eyes fixed unwaveringly on Zheng Jingfeng. His voice was perfectly composed. "I know exactly what I'd need to do. You don't need to worry."

When Xie Qingcheng got home, he collapsed into his chair, exhausted and distraught. Though he did truly trust that He Yu wouldn't be reckless with forbidden drugs like RN-13, he was not as optimistic about Lü Zhishu.

All the coincidences involved in the mystery of Wei Rong seemed to point in the same direction. He knew that a leak in Wei Rong's lab had hurt the pregnant Lü Zhishu enough that she had no choice but to use RN-13 to save herself and her child. He also knew that Lü Zhishu's personality changed after using the drug, enough to make her the way she was now.

With her changed personality, would Lü Zhishu have come to resent Wei Rong? Was she behind Wei Rong's death? After Wei Rong passed, could Lü Zhishu have taken Wei Rong's private experimental materials, and might they have included details about RN-13 and other drugs in development?

If that was the case, everything would match up to what Zheng Jingfeng said…

The more he thought about it, the more the truth seemed to come to light. Yet at the same time, a chilling sense of horror also deepened unbidden in Xie Qingcheng's heart. If Lü Zhishu had been working with Duan Wen, then it was obvious how Duan Wen's organization knew He Yu possessed the blood toxin.

Up until now, it had puzzled Xie Qingcheng that the organization hadn't made a move on He Yu despite knowing he had the blood toxin. Based on what he knew now, it was clear enough: It was because they'd had the blood toxin under their supervision from the very start. Lü Zhishu was He Yu's handler, so of course they had no need to take him by force.

In a flash of insight, Xie Qingcheng suddenly recalled that day right before they separated from Jiang Liping at the Zhilong Entertainment tower.

Jiang Liping had tried to warn He Yu about something, but the bracelet threatened her halfway through the sentence. As far as he could remember, what she'd managed to say was: "Beware kindness from the fat—"

Did she mean to say "the fat woman"? But the bracelet had sensed her intent; that descriptor had been judged dangerous enough that she couldn't say it out loud.

All the clues came together like the pieces of a puzzle, slowly revealing the shape of the terrifying truth that had been hidden for over twenty years.

If all of their conjectures were true, then…

Xie Qingcheng rose, opening the contacts list on his phone.

He had to have a talk with He Yu.

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Chapter 184:
Then Let Us Be Enemies

HIS CALL DIDN'T go through.

Xie Qingcheng went right to He Yu's company building, only to be stopped by security.

"Hello, sir. Who are you here to see?"

The He Group headquarters were more imposing than Zhilong Entertainment's. The security guard at the door was likely retired military; he was over six feet tall and stood with perfect posture, decked out in uniform. When Xie Qingcheng told him why he'd come, the guard hesitated. "Please wait," he said politely. "Let me contact Executive He's secretary."

Xie Qingcheng hadn't even thought of how unlikely it was for a random professor to get an audience with He Yu. Hearing the bodyguard call him Executive He was terribly strange and unfamiliar—surely that title couldn't possibly refer to the young man who'd eaten beef noodles outside his door on New Year's Eve.

Thankfully, the secretary replied quickly. The security guard, who'd never been hostile in the first place, only became more polite after the call. He called for a car to take Xie Qingcheng to the central building of the grounds.

The elevator rose up to the lofty top floor, where He Yu's secretary was waiting. Xie Qingcheng recognized her; she'd been He Jiwei's secretary before, and He Yu hadn't replaced her.

"Hello, Professor Xie," she said. "Please come with me."

Xie Qingcheng followed her through the hallway to the great hall and into another passageway to the reception room. He recognized several ladies and wealthy businessmen he'd met at Xie Xue's wedding, among them the Madam Kuo, who'd been gossiping about him at the airport convenience store.

In public, these people cared about keeping up appearances. Every last one of them was two-faced as a demon, and Xie Qingcheng's sudden appearance here only meant a glance at one another and standing up to exchange pleasantries.

"Professor Xie." Somehow, the first to speak was the woman who'd been discussing his manly charms at the airport. She might've been a gossip, but she also knew Xie Qingcheng was the elder brother of the Wei clan's new daughter-in-law, on top of being the new Executive He's lover. Sucking up to him was just common sense; after all, she was hoping He Yu would give them a percentage or two more profit on their new venture. "It's nice to meet you," she said warmly.

Xie Qingcheng looked back at her and did not extend his hand to shake. The woman's outstretched hand hung awkwardly in midair. Eventually, with an awkward laugh, she lowered it.

Once the secretary led Xie Qingcheng to a different room, she started grousing. "What's with that attitude? That cheap slut! Does he really think Young Master He would want him now that he's Executive He?"

But Xie Qingcheng wasn't giving her attitude. He simply didn't like her, and was too tired to waste any effort on empty gestures for someone he didn't like. He'd been like this back when he was working at Huzhou First Hospital. It never changed.

He Yu, however, had changed: The people working under him were more than permitted to deride Xie Qingcheng behind his back.

"Please sit," said the secretary with practiced ease. "I'll be back shortly with a cup of tea. This is Executive He's office. He's still in the middle of something right now and asks you to please wait here—he'll be with you in about half an hour."

Soon, the tea was ready. Shockingly, it wasn't anything rare and expensive—it was Xie Qingcheng's favorite, the Tibetan 'cold fragrance of snowy fields.'

Noticing Xie Qingcheng glancing at the box of tea, the secretary spoke up in deferential tones. "Executive He had me prepare this for you specifically. He said you might not like other varieties. If there's anything else you need, please call for me. Otherwise, I'll give you some space."

The office had been tidied up, but it was obvious that He Yu worked here often.

There weren't many books on the shelves—there were a few about screenwriting and directing, as well as a copy of *Ode to the Nightingale*. The laptop on the desk was on but locked, accompanied by a stack of printouts. Beside the computer was a plain mug, half full of black coffee.

Xie Qingcheng sat down at the desk. While he waited for He Yu to return, he pondered the questions he was going to ask, and how he was going to ask them. The office window had been left slightly ajar, and a summer breeze swept in, rustling the papers on the desk. A few pages fluttered down to land by Xie Qingcheng's feet. He picked them up and glanced at them—some irrelevant doodles and thoughtlessly scrawled text.

The first thing he saw was 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water,' and the ensuing pang in his heart made him want to put the papers back. But then he saw another line of familiar text among the scribbles.

It said…

The moment the writing registered, Xie Qingcheng's heart skipped a beat. He sat there frozen stiff in utter shock.

Half an hour later, He Yu stepped through the door. His eyes unerringly fell on Xie Qingcheng, but the lighting hid Xie Qingcheng's unnatural pallor.

"Xie-ge," said He Yu gently. "My phone was on airplane mode during the meeting, so I didn't see your texts. I didn't expect to see you here. Did something happen?"

Xie Qingcheng composed himself. "Sit down," he said.

He Yu blinked, then lowered his eyelashes and smiled.

Xie Qingcheng was a professor, the kind of prodigy who was an expert in his field. Before that, he'd been a deeply sought-after physician. He Yu had once heard a matchmaker say doctors and teachers were arrogant people. They *looked* poised and dignified, but everything they did belied an unintentional hauteur. He used to think that "hauteur" was a derogatory

term, and had agreed—Xie Qingcheng did indeed put on unbelievable airs, as if he thought the entire world owed him a kowtow of respect.

But He Yu had changed his mind on this a long time ago. To his mind, that cool yet aloof aura fit Xie Qingcheng's face perfectly.

And Xie Qingcheng was well within his rights to act like that. Doctors and teachers were always treated with respect, and as time passed, of course they'd grow used to giving people instructions and expecting to be listened to. It was just habit, not malice.

And so the man who'd spent the past few days scaring the wits out of his business partners, this thorny and intractable Executive He, really did sit down obediently across from his Doctor Xie.

Xie Qingcheng didn't waste any time. "I wanted to talk to you about something," he said, leaning back in his chair with his hands interlocked.

Something flickered in He Yu's eyes. "What about?"

"RN-13."

He Yu paused. "Why this all of a sudden?"

"I found some new clues recently," said Xie Qingcheng.

"Mn."

"Potentially linked to your mother."

He Yu said nothing.

"Now that you've taken He Jiwei's position, I'm sure you've gained access to much that you didn't have before."

"That is correct," said He Yu. "But if you mean to say our company was involved with RN-13, that's totally incorrect."

Xie Qingcheng had no intention of beating around the bush. "When you were looking at the international ventures your mother used to manage, did you find anything amiss?"

"Nothing," said He Yu. "The company's dealings have always been aboveboard and legal in every country of relevance. I don't know what you heard or where you heard this from, but now that you've come to me, this is my answer." His voice remained smooth and patient, but that wasn't what Xie Qingcheng wanted—he could tell He Yu was lying.

Beside those thoughtless scribbles on the fallen sheet of paper was part of a chemical equation. He Yu wasn't a STEM major; he didn't know the whole complicated string by heart, and he'd only doodled it in a moment of inattention. He hadn't thought about it too hard, or considered whether anyone might be able to understand that scrap of writing.

But Xie Qingcheng could. And he knew what it was: It was a chemical formula linked to the synthesis of obedience potion.

"Are you telling the truth?" asked Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu looked at him. "Yes."

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes.

This was just how the boy operated. As soon as he decided to keep something a secret, he clammed up impossibly tight. Anyone who asked would receive only falsehoods or silence. Even if Xie Qingcheng asked him outright why he wrote down the chemical formula for a component of obedience potion, He Yu wouldn't answer. There was no point in pressing him.

"Very well, He Yu. Let me tell you something—whether it's in the past or in the future, if anyone ever tells you there's a complete cure for psychological Ebola resulting from RN-13, do not believe them. That's a lie, no matter who it's coming from. Don't forget how many people that organization has killed, and how many times you nearly lost your life because of them." Xie Qingcheng paused, his eyes piercing deep into He Yu's. "I ask that you refrain from making deals with the devil."

He Yu was quiet for a very long time. "I won't, Xie-ge. Trust me," he said. But there was no sign of relief on Xie Qingcheng's face. "I know you can trust He Yu," the boy added, "but you find it hard to trust Executive He. However, in front of you, I will always be He Yu. I hope you understand that I say this with full sincerity."

Xie Qingcheng stared back. "Then I hope everything you've said today was sincere."

He Yu's smile stiffened. The eyes of the man in front of him were like a mirror, and in their reflection, he adjusted his unnatural smile back to bulletproof pleasantness.

Xie Qingcheng was deeply disappointed by their conversation, but no one could pry sincerity out of He Yu once he had his walls up. After a few more trivial exchanges, he rose to leave—but He Yu called his name before his hand even touched the doorknob.

"Xie Qingcheng."

His fingertips froze on the cool metal handle.

"If—and I do mean if," said He Yu, behind him. "If I was fatally ill and all I wanted was to live, and making a deal with the devil was the only way for me to survive…would you forgive me?"

The room was silent save for the ticking of the clock on the wall. He Yu stood, watching Xie Qingcheng's silhouette—tall, but now impossibly frail.

"I would stand against you," said Xie Qingcheng. His voice was smooth, unmarred by the slightest ripple, but hiding an entire rift's worth of heartbreak. He turned slightly, to take one last look at He Yu before he opened the door. "So I ask that you refuse."

That night, He Yu stood by the study window, staring out at the distant artificial lawn and lakeside view. The evening breeze was faintly touched with chill. He tossed a paper airplane to be carried off by the wind; it flew all the way across the glade and landed in the hydrangea bushes below.

The flowers were in full bloom. He looked at them a moment longer, then sat down with pen in hand to write.

It wasn't a particularly long piece, but he spent a long time mulling it over. The moon had drifted high into the sky by the time he finally put down his pen. Hesitating in thought, he slipped the paper into the encyclopedia of rare diseases on the desk. There were many letters already tucked into its pages—this would be the last.

Thud-thud-thud. Someone was knocking on the door.

"Enter," said He Yu.

Lü Zhishu's face appeared in the opening, wan but adorned with a forced smile. In this moment, she looked just like one of those plastic food

models kept in the display cases at chain restaurants—obviously fake, fatty meat covered in dust.

"Still working, He Yu? Mom made you a cup of hot cocoa…"

"Leave it there," he said. "And go rest."

Lü Zhishu was filled with apprehension. After He Jiwei passed, she'd intended to ensure He Yu took over in name only. But though he might been young, he turned out to be much more ruthless than his father. She had been very weak at first, and by the time she recovered, she couldn't control him at all anymore. He'd even beat her to the punch and taken control of the international ventures that had once been her domain. When she'd found out about that, she'd tossed and turned in her sickbed, terrified that He Yu would learn of the atrocities hidden within those dealings.

The eighth day after He Jiwei's death, He Yu went to see her, alone, for the very first time. Just as she expected, her secrets had been uncovered. He Yu had discovered one of the export suppliers she'd been working with produced the kind of obedience drug Huang Zhilong used. When He Yu slammed that page of evidence down in front of her, Lü Zhishu had nearly died of fright. She'd thought she was done for.

But businesspeople were cunning. In that critical moment, she pulled that essence from every last cell in her body, gleaned from years of experience in the field, and tacked together a logical excuse. Weeping, she said she only wanted to have someone develop a drug capable of curing the effects of RN-13. That was why she'd engaged in underground dealings with Duan Wen's overseas venture. She said she wasn't only doing it for He Yu, but for herself as well. She'd had enough of her own worsening obesity, ugliness…madness…and unrecognizable self.

I only want to live in peace, she said. *The way I was when your daddy first met me.*

He Yu, she asked. *Don't you want to live in peace?*

Do you want to live like that forever? You're only twenty… A treatment for the effects of RN-13 has existed for years, and both Xie Qingcheng and Anthony have administered it to you—but it slowly started to lose efficacy. It was only controlling the symptoms, not the root cause… But with enough test cases, it'll be possible to develop a drug capable of

curing that cause. You'll live to ninety, even a hundred years old… In all those decades you wouldn't have otherwise lived, how many of life's possibilities will you get to experience? How much more will you get to have?

Lü Zhishu could tell that some of what she said struck a chord in his heart.

Her hands tightened on her arms as she wept. "I'm not like Huang Zhilong. We've never killed anyone, or committed arson, or kidnapped students—I just wanted to do research without restrictions. I just wanted to find a cure that could save my life… I…I just wanted to make sure all my family members could live in peace. Are you really going to report me, He Yu?" she sobbed.

"I know I haven't taken good care of you, but I've always wanted to make amends… It's been so many years. You're grown up now. You won't accept my attention, and I know this is all coming too late…but I've never given up trying to cure you. Even if it means breaking the law. What about you? Are you really going to treat your mother like this, before your father's body has even gone cold? Are you going to destroy your mom, yourself, and the entire He family…?"

With her words echoing in his ears, He Yu had sent Lü Zhishu away. He went back to his desk and stared at the cup of hot cocoa, the veneer of sweetness vanishing from his face. He reached out and tossed it into the trash.

The cocoa spilled, the pungent smell of sugar filling him with disgust. He knew she was trying to curry favor with him.

She didn't need to go to such lengths. He had no plans to give the evidence to the police, and he would even—he would even cooperate with her to do something even riskier. He Yu pressed his hand to his chest. Once it was done, this act would be enough to reassure her, and even Duan Wen. She had no need to be so apprehensively ingratiating.

Scowling, He Yu cut off that line of thought. He reviewed his next steps on his phone. The last shipment of illicit goods would go out next week. Lü Zhishu promised him this would be the last from the He family, that this was just the last of what she had on hand.

He Yu bought a ticket to Guangshi.

This would be it. His eyes darkened. Everything hinged on this. He had to board the ship himself to ensure it all went smoothly.

In the headquarters of the Huzhou police department, Hu Ting—who'd just rushed in from Hangzhou—reviewed all the files he had on hand, paying particular attention to the notebook of Jiang Liping's that Zheng Jingfeng had found. He looked up with a sigh, staring into the faces of everyone in the office.

"Those are the details of the operation," he said. "This is a top secret mission. Next week, in collaboration with the Guangshi Police Department, we will officially take action against the criminals."

The cold white light of the conference room shone down on him. "Our mission code name has been finalized—Dreambreaker. It is imperative that we catch the He Group suspects, once and for all!"

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Chapter 185:
It Begins

ONE WEEK LATER, during a He Pharmaceuticals key conference led by the still-sick Lü Zhishu, chaos erupted.

Police broke through the doors and captured her in front of a shocked crowd. The officer holding the arrest warrant cited that Lü Zhishu was under suspicion of involvement in Zhilong Entertainment's overseas crimes, and she was being taken into custody for questioning.

Lü Zhishu, of course, resisted arrest. "What right do you have to apprehend an innocent person?" she cried in distress. "What evidence do you have?!"

"Arrest warrants have to be requested and approved. That's all the proof you need that we have the appropriate evidence. Please comply and head to the police department for investigation. We will show you the evidence in person once we arrive, and your cooperation will be needed to explain its existence." Staring down at her, the officer gestured for his underlings to restrain Vice President Lü Zhishu of He Pharmaceuticals. "There's one more individual who must cooperate with our investigation: Mr. He Yu."

Shocked, a nearby secretary replied in a shaking voice, "E-Executive He went on a business trip to Guangshi…"

The officer turned with a solemn expression. "Then we'll have Executive Lü head out alone."

Inside the Huzhou police department's interrogation room, surveillance cameras were running and all the appropriate staff were present.

Lü Zhishu was restrained in her chair. Before her were a few high-ranking police officers, accompanied by a man from outside the local

system, sitting with his arms crossed in the middle of the room, his lined face set in a scowl.

Due to the power of the “protective umbrella” they had installed in the Huzhou public safety system, Lü Zhishu had been certain it would be impossible for her to be taken into custody. She considered some absurd possibilities—had Duan Wen disapproved of her methods enough that he decided to discard her? But that was completely unreasonable. Hadn’t she fixed her mistake? She even convinced He Yu to help her of his own volition…

When she saw the face of the man sitting in the chair, though, she went pale. She realized why it was that their umbrella had fallen. Nothing could stand in the face of a storm of this magnitude.

Sitting there, emanating doom, was none other than Chen Man’s own grandfather…Commissar Wang!

The head officer cleared his throat, drawing Lü Zhishu’s attention away from Commissar Wang. “We’re old friends, Executive Lü. You’re the ambassador for the ten top Huzhou-native founders. Every year, we’ve helped your company with some small tasks or handled some minor cases with you. We’ve been reasonably acquainted—we won’t waste too much time on pleasantries. We’ve invited you here today to have you verify something.”

He took out a bottle of medication inside a plastic bag. The packaging declared that it was cough syrup. “I’m sure you recognize this.”

Lü Zhishu did her best to stay calm. “I do… This is the children’s cough syrup we produce.”

“The May batch this year had foreign labels. It was OTC medication produced for overseas markets,” added the officer. He opened the bottle. “This is what our colleague in Guangshi, comrade Chen Yan, assisting on the case”—he shot a glance at Commissar Wang, his imposing voice taking on a fawning note—“found during an unannounced investigation at the He Pharmaceuticals warehouse in Guangshi.”

Lü Zhishu tried to remain composed. She’d weathered countless storms over the years through her cunning and poise; now, she steadied her breathing and looked up. “It’s just a bottle of cough syrup, one we sell

domestically as well. Frankly, I don't know what regulation it's violated for me to be accosted like this."

"We wouldn't accost you for no reason," said the officer. "Obviously, this is not ordinary cough syrup. During the inspection, our police dog exhibited an intense response to the batch of syrup in your warehouse, but there were no drugs or explosives."

The man took out a thick stack of papers and had one of the lower-ranked policemen hand it to Lü Zhishu. She glanced at it, registering the line of text that said "Confirmed by forensic evaluation."

"After testing," he continued, "we found that one of the components is a rare drug that appeared in the Huang Zhilong case, the one that was injected into Officer Chen and resulted in his hospitalization—obedience potion!"

Lü Zhishu said nothing.

"Executive Lü, Zhilong Entertainment was the one that used obedience potion. Could the producers of said drug be…He Pharmaceuticals?"

The woman went white as a sheet. "Nonsense! This is slander!"

"This is just routine questioning."

"I don't know what obedience potion is…nor have I developed any! This cough syrup is a legal medication approved for use by the central government; it's been stocked for years without any concerns—there's never even been any negative publicity!"

"But the liquid was found to be the same chemical as the illicit substance used by Zhilong Entertainment."

Lü Zhishu's corpulent chest heaved like the cheeks of a bullfrog. As if reminded of something, she snapped, "You found this in the Guangshi warehouse. People come in and out of there all day, who knows when someone would have the chance to swap the cough syrup for this so-called illicit substance?! How does that prove we manufactured it? How is it proof we were going to sell it?!"

"You mean to say someone is trying to frame He Pharmaceuticals?"

“Isn’t that obvious?!” Her swollen sausage fingers curled into a white-knuckled grip. “It’s a plot…a plot!” she cried, voice shaking. “Someone’s trying to take advantage of the company’s chaos in the wake of my husband’s recent death—they found their chance to swap the goods and frame us!”

The police officers exchanged glances.

“Which is to say,” said the head officer, “you’ve never used this kind of drug, let alone manufactured it. Correct?”

“…Yes!”

The man crossed his arms, fingertips tapping his biceps.

“Executive Lü, on account of our long acquaintanceship and all the tax the He Group has paid to the country, let me warn you—sometimes, it’s much better to confess things early than late. Lies are no help to anyone.”

White-faced, Lü Zhishu squeezed the words from between her fatty lips. “I’m telling the truth. Cross my heart—our company has never done anything illegal.”

With a shrill receiving beep, a mocking voice came from one corner of the interrogation room. “Executive Lü isn’t religious, is she? Crossing your heart doesn’t mean much.”

Lü Zhishu whipped around.

There was a loudspeaker at the upper left corner of the room. It wasn’t just the officers inside who were watching her interrogation; more people were watching through the screen.

“Who is that?” she asked, afraid.

“She doesn’t recognize my voice? That’s no problem. I’ll come see you in person soon enough.”

After a moment, the sliding doors were pushed aside by the stationed guards. Piercing light spilled in, tracing out the burly shape of a man. He was extraordinarily tall, at least six foot two—he had to lower his head as he stepped through the door. Straightening up once he was inside, he stood with his head up and his arms behind his back, typical of a soldier standing at ease.

Lü Zhishu lost all color in her face the second she caught sight of him. “You…” she mumbled.

It was Wei-erge.

He strode over to the interrogation desk in his military boots, staring at her like a hunting tiger. He came to a stop and saluted Chen Man’s grandfather. “Commissar Wang.”

Commissar Wang saw Lü Zhishu’s distress. He hadn’t spoken a word this whole time, only studied her with a stern look on his face. Now he finally bothered to look at the Wei brother and nod.

“You’re here? Good. Show her.”

Wei-erge moved to Lü Zhishu and gave her a perfunctory greeting. “Executive Lü.” Without further ado, he handed her a stack of photocopied records.

“An admission of guilt. Newly offered by a Golden Triangle drug trafficker, who said he once dealt high potency aphrodisiacs with you, Executive Lü. And that aphrodisiac incense was the substance discovered at Daylily Pavilion the night of my brother’s wedding.”

Lü Zhishu’s legs had begun to shake as soon as the word “aphrodisiacs” left his mouth. “That’s…that’s pure coincidence. The aphrodisiac… That’s personal, it was for myself and my husband. Isn’t this overreaching?!”

“Is that so?” Wei-erge scoffed. “That’s not all. Have a look at this.” He pulled his phone out from his pocket and slammed it down to show her some repaired video footage.

Lü Zhishu felt goosebumps rising on her skin as her eyes fell upon the screen. She turned stiff and shriveled, like a mummy freshly dumped out of its coffin.

This was footage from the security cameras at Xie Xue’s wedding venue! It showed a staff member cleaning the villa, and after about three minutes someone else appeared in the frame—a woman in ornate formal wear, dress swishing around her elephant-trunk legs as she walked. There was no question that it was Lü Zhishu herself.

The Lü Zhishu in the video looked around to make sure there was nobody nearby. Walking up to speak to the staff member, she suddenly pulled something that resembled a bottle of perfume from her bag and spritzed it in the woman's face. The employee skittered backward in fear, but then her face took on a look of acceptance. She bowed to Lü Zhishu and turned back to her work, while Lü Zhishu rushed away as if afraid to be discovered.

The video ended.

As the clip finished, Wei-erge sneered. "Was it a good show? Did you like it? I sure did—I've watched at least eighty times."

Lü Zhishu said nothing.

Commissar Wang finally spoke up, voice very slow. He didn't erupt in a furious outburst, but the pressure inside the room seemed to ratchet up. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Her lips parted, only to close again. Sweat beaded on her bulbous forehead and slid down her skin; she swallowed again and again, her mind racing. In the pallid light of the interrogation room, she slowly looked up, her eyes spiderwebbed with red veins.

"This is still not evidence," she said.

Wei-erge wanted to slap her in the face. "Lü Zhishu, I'm telling you—this footage was intentionally destroyed, and it took several months to recover. It's been notarized, as well. Your baseless proclamation means nothing here."

She knew she could not waver. If she did, she would truly be doomed. So she caught all of the composure threatening to flee her body, including the voice seeking to escape through her throat, and pulled it together to create her proof.

"…I never said the footage was fake." Lü Zhishu took a deep breath, settling down at last. "The video is real."

Wei-erge narrowed his eyes. "Then how do you plan to—"

"But what proof do you have that I sprayed obedience potion?"

"You—!" sputtered one of the police officers nearby.

“I sprayed mouthwash for her,” she said. “I have it with me all the time. Her breath smelled bad and it bothered me. I was rude, yes, but that’s none of your business.”

The officer was on the verge of slamming his fist down on the table. “Lü Zhishu! That employee said she lost consciousness, and there were traces of the substance in her system—how dare you lie?! How are you going to deny—”

“Could that not be someone else’s work?” Lü Zhishu’s talent for unwavering persistence was unmatched. Anyone else would have confessed in fear as soon as they were confronted with this kind of evidence, but she knew very well that she would not get any leniency if she cooperated. If she did, she was done for. When she realized that, her manner became invincible—she was an immovable object.

“What proof do you have that what I sprayed was obedience potion? Does such evidence exist, Second Young Master Wei?”

“…You deny this, correct?” asked Wei-erge.

“I do.”

They stared into each other’s eyes for a long beat. Wei-erge’s knuckles creaked audibly, and then he scoffed. “Your silver tongue really saved your life, Executive Lü.”

“You flatter me, Second Young Master Wei.” Lü Zhishu’s skin still had a sheen of cold sweat, but her composure was returning. “In any case, I gain nothing from having a staff member wreck the Wei family’s wedding. We have a significant number of business dealings, remember? And a decent working relationship. There’s no benefit for me to ruining Third Young Master Wei’s wedding.”

“What if you wanted to ruin someone else?”

“Who? Xie Qingcheng?” She snorted. “He’s just a professor who we employed a few years ago; I don’t have any personal grudges against him. I wouldn’t spare an errant thought for someone like him—besides, I could make his life hell in all sorts of other ways if he really had offended me. I wouldn’t need to go to such lengths.” She paused. “Don’t forget, Second Young Master Wei—the victim in all of that was my son. If there was

anything shady going on in our company, He Yu would know about it. You couldn't possibly think I'd harm him too?"

"Based on what I know of Executive Lü, your treatment of your eldest cannot exactly be described as caring."

"An outsider like you wouldn't know how caring I may or may not be," said Lü Zhishu. "Besides, this bears no relation to the current topic at hand."

Sweat was no longer pouring from her brow. Her gaze stayed pinned on Wei-erge. She was sure now that it wasn't Duan Wen intentionally trying to get rid of her. Otherwise, they'd have much more evidence—which meant she was much less terrified.

And she was certain the evidence they did have was not complete—they had enough to scare her, to try to frighten her into confessing, but if she refused to admit to anything, it wouldn't be enough to prove her guilt. Commissar Wang, she realized, was only here to add to the psychological pressure. If they'd had enough direct evidence to prove the He Group's guilt, Commissar Wang would not have had to grace them with his presence.

The thought soothed Lü Zhishu further. Her voice steadied. "Your chain of evidence is incomplete. You cannot convict me of anything. I've collaborated with your questioning to the extent I am required by the law. Now, let me leave immediately."

Commissar Wang was already scowling. There was a long, long pause—hard to say how long. Then he suddenly left the room. The captain watched him go. Now Commissar Wang looked more anxious than Lü Zhishu—maybe he was the one who needed to be soothed.

"Don't be in such a rush to leave, Executive Lü. After all, you've come all this way." Wei-erge was the first to speak. He glanced at his wrist. "If you're innocent, there's nothing to worry about. Legally speaking, the arrest warrant is valid for forty-eight hours."

"What do you mean? You want me to stay here for forty-eight hours?!"

"That breaks no rule."

“You’re wasting the Group’s time—do you know how much money my time is worth? Let me warn you, Second Young—”

“Nothing you say can scare me,” he said. “After something so scandalous happening during my little brother’s wedding, it’s hard for me to believe that no one’s intentionally trying to hurt the Wei family. I have to get to the bottom of this, and over the next forty-eight hours, we’ll do our best to find more evidence. For example…” He paused, bending down and lowering his voice. “We’ll work with the police in Guangshi to investigate the batch Executive He is presently monitoring on its way out of the country.”

Lü Zhishu’s pupils shrank.

“Sir, the Guangshi operation is already underway,” said the officer behind Wei-erge, a temporary transfer from Guangshi. “Huzhou will be informed immediately if anything is found.”

“Then let us sit and wait.” The corners of Wei-erge’s mouth quirked up. “Executive Lü, if you haven’t done anything wrong, you have nothing to fear from the next forty-eight hours. If we still have nothing in the next two days, we’ll certainly send you back to your residence with all dignity and respect. This nephew will personally come round to apologize and make amends for any damages caused, Executive Lü.”

She was pale, but not totally afraid.

They were…going to search He Yu’s ship…

She had no doubts about He Yu’s wits. He was a very sharp boy, and before he left, she’d made sure to remind him that this was the very last batch, and that now the entire He family were all ants on the same rope. She’d told him to be particularly careful and prepare for sudden emergencies.

By now, if things were going smoothly, He Yu would’ve reached international waters. Once he was beyond the country’s borders, he would no longer be required to regularly send his location to domestic marine bases. That combined with his hacking abilities meant Guangshi law enforcement wouldn’t be able to find his vessel anytime soon.

Catching up to him would be no easy task.

“Very well.” Lü Zhishu looked up at Wei-erge. “Then let us watch and see.”

Outside the interrogation room, Commissar Wang lit a cigarette.

The captain followed him out, voice shaking. “Commissar Wang…”

“How are things in Guangshi?” Because of what Xie Qingcheng had said to him, he’d only shared the obedience potion formula with a handful of people; he’d taken all the necessary steps to keep it classified. But it was clear now that the problems involving this drug were far more severe than he’d anticipated. Now he had to keep the drug from spreading and being researched further, while simultaneously doing his best to control and investigate the entire affair. He had to use absolute caution in deciding whom to tap for the work.

Commissar Wang did not blow up at the officer. He was only asking about results.

The captain braced himself. “He Yu’s ship has crossed into international waters. Though our arrest of Lü Zhishu was sudden, he must’ve figured it out somehow. He’s activated stealth shielding software on the vessel and now…we can’t find it through satellite tracking at all. If he goes ashore and the cargo is unloaded, if it’s transferred to another vessel at sea, or if he just destroys it all, it’ll be difficult to find much evidence moving forward.”

Commissar Wang glanced at the interrogation room behind him, taking a violent drag on his cigarette. “Is it not at all possible to crack his stealth shielding?”

“From what we know, He Yu’s capabilities place him among the top five hackers in the world. His true abilities might make him first. Even with military systems, it’ll take a long time to crack. Unless—”

“Enough with the buts and unlesses! It’s already come to this—don’t waste my time. Unless what? Speak up!”

The captain mopped his brow. “Unless he willingly picks up a call or communication. That’s the only way he can be tracked…but he’s not an idiot. Who the hell would he actually respond to right now? Guangshi are

doing all they can, and your grandson's been doing his best this whole time, but you know how it is… What if we try Lü Zhishu's phone? See if he'll be willing to talk to his own mom?"

"Try it now!" said Commissar Wang.

With the interrogation concluded, Lü Zhishu was now being lawfully detained. The captain retrieved her phone, enclosed in its evidence bag. Inside the room, clouded with the smoke from these old men all smoking like chimneys, they had Forensics unlock the device and call He Yu.

Beep… Beep—

They didn't have much hope that He Yu would pick up in the first place, but they hadn't expected him to decline after only two rings.

"…Isn't he worried that something happened to his mom?" wondered the captain.

Wei-erge's scowl stayed in place. "He knows nothing will happen to her—as long as he doesn't pick up."

"Then why don't we try a text…" the captain offered, though he knew it was futile. But making the attempt still looked better than standing around helpless, maybe even leaving the tiniest positive impression on Commissar Wang.

The carefully worded text was sent. If He Yu had no reason to be wary, or was at all likely to be swayed, it was very possible that he would reply.

But time ticked on. One minute, ten, and then half an hour…

The tension in the room was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

Commissar Wang went pale with fury—and that was when a phone rang. He looked up immediately, only to find everyone else watching him.

The sound wasn't coming from Lü Zhishu's phone. It was his own.

He didn't want to pick up at first. It was only when he saw the contact name—Chen Man, working on the case from Guangshi—that he cleared his throat and answered.

"Hello? Mm, yes, go on…" His expression changed after just a few more exchanges. He looked at the office door. "Really? It'll work? Good,

then, let him in.”

Commissar Wang put down the phone. “Chen Yan said he told someone about the situation. That person can give it a try, but he has to talk to us first.”

Knocks sounded on the office door, and a policewoman opened it. “Sirs and Captain, someone’s here saying he can help us solve the—”

Before she could finish, the commissar gestured for her to lead him in.

Everyone in the room stared at the doorway, and all of them were shocked at the sight—particularly Wei-erge. He’d been sprawled lazily across his chair, but the sight of the newcomer made him lean forward, eyes widening and hands letting go of the armrests.

Xie Qingcheng’s silhouette, frail but steely nonetheless, appeared in the doorway. His face was bone-white; he seemed condensed from fog itself, liable to disperse at a moment’s notice.

His sharp eyes flickered around the room, finally landing on Chen Man’s grandfather.

“Commissar Wang,” he said. “Long time no see.”

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Chapter 186:
You’re the Only One Who Can Lie to Me

COMMISSAR WANG narrowed his eyes. “Professor Xie.”

“I already know that obedience potion was found during the investigation into the He Group,” said Xie Qingcheng. “And I know about the restored video footage of what happened at the wedding venue.”

“Xiao-Yan told you?”

“Yes.”

Commissar Wang motioned for a policewoman to fetch Xie Qingcheng a chair. “Take a seat.”

The commissar’s face was lined with exhaustion. During a raid with the Guangshi Police Department, Chen Man had found banned substances in a He Group warehouse, and so he’d requested permission to pursue He Yu’s ship at sea. An operation like that required a large police force, but his commanding officer had no reason to refuse. At this very moment, Chen Man and his fellow officers were already aboard a ship, sailing toward the open sea.

Naturally, Commissar Wang hoped that his grandson could achieve some degree of distinction. Ever since he was a child, Chen Man had never been as capable as his half brother. Even if nobody dared comment on it, there were nevertheless those who secretly mocked him in private, saying that he was inferior even to the offspring of an ordinary woman of humble origins.

But although he hoped for a bright future for his grandson, Commissar Wang did not wish for Chen Man to truly be put in any danger. He tried to advise him against this. Now that he’d learned the truth behind the poisoning at the villa, though, Chen Man was determined to get to the bottom of the He family’s case, and there was nothing Commissar Wang could do to stop him.

“Time is of the essence, so I’ll keep this short,” said Commissar Wang. “How confident are you about tracking down He Yu’s vessel? He

isn’t even answering his mother’s calls.”

In lieu of an answer or explanation, Xie Qingcheng took out his cell phone and set it on the table. “You’ll know once I make the call.”

Wei-erge narrowed his eyes. After spending so many years among men, his gaydar had become highly refined. He’d always thought that He Yu had an unusual relationship with Xie Qingcheng. Yes, their tryst in the Daylily Pavilion had been caused by an aphrodisiac, but something about the atmosphere at the time had spoken of something more. Now, it seemed his speculations had proven correct.

Of course, no one exposed them, despite knowing the truth. They were all smart individuals; what need was there to tear through the facade so completely?

Commissar Wang remained somewhat wary of Xie Qingcheng. “In that case, if you’re really so close to He Yu, why are you helping us?”

“First, I was involved in the events that transpired at the wedding,” Xie Qingcheng replied. “Second, I’m connected to the matter of the obedience potion. Third…” He paused, the silence stretching on, before he finally continued, “Twenty years ago, my parents were killed in a plot carried out by Duan Wen’s organization. Now, it seems highly likely that Lü Zhishu is one of Duan Wen’s coconspirators—I’ve waited for twenty years now, and I want to know the truth, because the truth concerns my parents.”

Leaning back in his chair, Commissar Wang nodded with a sigh. “Very well… In that case…” His expression relaxed slightly. “In that case…you may try.”

But Xie Qingcheng didn’t dial the number right away.

He met Commissar Wang’s eyes—eyes that bore a slight resemblance to Chen Man’s—and recalled how he felt when he received Chen Man’s call from the front lines, when he’d learned everything that had happened.

“Ge,” Chen Man had said, “if he genuinely likes you, why would he devote himself to his family’s evil cause? When he knows what his mother has done? He’s perfectly aware that he’s working for a criminal organization! When I arrest him, I’m going to ask him…if he’s really so heartless! This case involves your parents, my brother—even He Yu himself. We have to stop him before he does anything that will result in

serious criminal consequences. There's still time, but if he truly begins negotiations, hides evidence, or anything else beyond that… Xie-ge, you know as well as I that the only thing waiting for him is a death sentence."

But had He Yu really done such a thing?

Xie Qingcheng recalled the night they parted in Moyu Alley. He Yu had held him, saying that perhaps, moving forward, he would no longer be the He Yu that Xie Qingcheng knew.

He recalled the moment just before he left He Yu's office, when He Yu asked him how he would react if He Yu was doing this simply to survive.

At the time, his answer had been, "I would stand against you, so I ask that you refuse."

Xie Qingcheng was willing to believe in him; he didn't think that He Yu was the type of person who would allow others to suffer the same way he did. Deep down, he did not believe that He Yu would truly oppose him—that he would truly become his enemy.

Though the full scale of Lü Zhishu's actions angered and shocked him to the core, he was certain that they had nothing to do with He Yu. This had to be some sort of misunderstanding, something the police had missed.

Instead of ignoring the matter, allowing the police to hunt down He Yu and back him into a corner until he had no choice but to take desperate action with irreversible consequences, it would be better for Xie Qingcheng to offer his cooperation and present certain demands that would allow for He Yu's return. That way, if worse came to worst, he would still be able to protect He Yu from unforeseen harm.

Surfacing from his memories, Xie Qingcheng turned to Commissar Wang. "I have a few requests."

"Go on."

"If you locate He Yu," he began, "you must not use violence against him before there is sufficient evidence to prove that he has indeed committed a crime."

"Of course."

“Second, in the event that there *is* evidence of criminal activity, you cannot use violence against He Yu if he has not harmed any members of the police.”

Commissar Wang and the other higher-ups exchanged a look. Eventually, Commissar Wang said, “Very well.”

“Third, if there is no choice but to use force against him, the police must first provide him the opportunity to explain himself and tell the truth.”

“That’s fine, we can fulfill that request as well.”

“Other than that,” Xie Qingcheng said, “if possible, I would like to speak to him directly over the phone.”

As long as it was supervised, the police had all to gain and nothing to lose from such a conversation. On the off chance that something did go wrong, they could easily bring the situation under control. Commissar Wang agreed to this request as well.

“None of that will be a problem. Do you have any other requests?”

“That’s all.”

“Good.” Commissar Wang gazed at him intently. “In that case, let’s begin.”

“Please wait a moment.” The door swung open once more as the director entered. This was a crucial, top secret case; it was only natural for Director Hu to join them. Aside from Commissar Wang, everyone in the office promptly rose to greet him with a salute. Director Hu waved their greeting aside, eyes fixed on Xie Qingcheng.

“I heard you speaking outside. You’re Xie Ping’s son, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Your parents were demoted twice before finally being transferred to low-level local law enforcement,” Director Hu said. “I want to ask you a question: Why are all your requests made in the interest of the suspect?”

Xie Qingcheng sat bolt upright in his chair as he looked up to meet his eyes. “Because just as I believe that my parents’ demotions were the consequence of foul play, I believe that he is innocent.” His voice was soft,

but his gaze was sharp, the aura he exuded an even match for Director Hu's. "I don't want anyone around me to ever be falsely accused again."

Director Hu narrowed his eyes. Xie Qingcheng was clearly speaking back to him without any pretense of deference, yet he showed no sign of anger. Instead, he studied Xie Qingcheng thoughtfully, as if considering the man's words.

"In that case," he said at last, "what if there is evidence? What if this man you believe does hurt the police and, like Huang Zhilong, threatens the lives of others while resisting arrest?"

"He won't."

"But what if…?"

Silence.

Finally, Xie Qingcheng said, "In that case, I will leave it to you to act in accordance with the law."

Director Hu's demeanor was imperious as he regarded Xie Qingcheng. After a few beats of silence, he straightened up and said "Bring your cell phone" before nodding and offering a polite greeting to Commissar Wang. He then turned to the rest of the room.

"Head to the command room and contact Guangshi. We will try to locate the missing ship again."

On a ship sailing through international waters, He Yu was adjusting the signal frequency to make an encrypted call to someone speaking in slangy, colloquial English. After a brief conversation, he instructed his assistant to inform the captain of an alteration to their route.

He knew what he was doing was wrong, but he couldn't give up now. There were things that he had to obtain.

"We'll reach the designated anchorage in about two hours," his assistant told him. "They'll send a ship out to meet us for the exchange."

"I'm curious who Mandela Island is sending," said He Yu. Mandela Island was Duan Wen's hideout in Australia. He Yu knew the name, but not the location; "Mandela Island" was merely a meaningless alias.

“Unfortunately, you won’t be able to see their faces.” His assistant, who had once worked for Lü Zhishu, explained, “The people sent out on missions from Mandela Island all wear specially designed masks. They don’t talk much, either.”

He Yu was about to say something else when his cell phone beeped. He glanced at it and saw an extremely familiar contact name.

Xie Qingcheng.

The message read: *Lü Zhishu has been summoned for questioning on suspicion of trafficking banned substances such as RN-13 across borders. He Yu, if you have nothing to do with this matter, or if you are struggling with any other difficulties, please call me back.*

His eyes flickered slightly.

A few moments later, he received another message: *I hope that you can trust me the way that I trust you.*

Silence.

“What is it?” asked his assistant.

“…Nothing. Tell the captain to go full speed ahead. The police’s patrol boats are faster than us. They can’t pin down our location, but they can determine our general bearing. A single minute of delay in the transaction could hurt us.”

He tucked his cell phone into his pocket without answering it.

Meanwhile, in the police command room, everyone was waiting for a miracle to happen. But as minute by minute ticked by on the clock on the wall, their miraculous opportunity seemed to slowly slip away.

Xie Qingcheng coughed softly. His constitution was poor to begin with, and he had been utterly exhausted lately. He was supposed to go to Meiyu for treatment today, but the situation with He Yu left him no choice but to brace himself and go to the police precinct. The mental stress had waves of dizziness pulsing over him, but he bore with it as he waited for He Yu’s response.

He hadn’t used any pretty words in his message to He Yu, nor had he tried to deceive He Yu in any way. He still remembered what He Yu had told him in his office that day.

“I will always be fully sincere with you.”

So Xie Qingcheng wanted to take a gamble. He hoped that a plainspoken and heartfelt message would cause He Yu to lower his defenses and feel that he could tell him anything… No matter what it was, he would bear it together with He Yu.

The hands on the clock moved on and on.

One minute…

Five minutes…

Xie Qingcheng was staring intently at his phone, but his mind was filled with scenes of He Yu’s bright smile.

“Xie-ge…”

“Xie Qingcheng…”

You have to believe me.

I will never leave you. I will love you and protect you every second I’m alive.

His cell phone suddenly vibrated.

Nearly everyone jumped to their feet. Xie Qingcheng’s phone had no passcode, so everyone could see the message alert on the screen. The police chief sitting nearest to him picked it up.

“What does it say?” Director Hu asked urgently.

“…It’s a message from China Mobile.”

Everyone groaned.

“Fucking China Mobile! Nearly gave me a heart attack!”

Xie Qingcheng’s heart was pounding. He couldn’t help coughing again, his head bowed low.

“He’s probably not going to answer,” Commissar Wang said. “Professor Xie, you overestimated your importance to him. The fact that he did not respond to your message can be taken to mean that he’s not innocent in this matter. He’s helping his mother escape justice.”

Xie Qingcheng grew dizzier and dizzier. The disturbance had exacerbated his condition, and his back was drenched with cold sweat. He pressed a hand to his temple, fighting back another wave of vertigo. “Commissar Wang, please wait a little longer.”

Silence.

“I…believe in him…”

Commissar Wang shot him a conflicted look. In his position, there were times when the commissar had no choice but to make harsh decisions—but he was a good man at heart. Seeing Xie Qingcheng’s resilience and trust for his companion, he couldn’t help but feel a growing sense of respect for the young fellow.

Director Hu shot him a questioning glance.

“Very well. Let’s wait a little longer,” Commissar Wang said.

Xie Qingcheng coughed softly. His mouth tasted faintly of blood. “Thank you…”

Another ten minutes went by.

There was still no response from He Yu. Xie Qingcheng tried calling him, but he didn’t pick up. It looked like he’d decided not to give the police anything to track.

The professionals involved in this particular operation were already discussing other solutions, like making an emergency call to Guangshi, or contacting the tech department again. Xie Qingcheng’s blood slowly turned cold as he sat there in his chair, his face pale and his ears ringing. He felt terribly ill, and he couldn’t quite hear what was going on around him, but he knew that these people were already considering killing He Yu, and were preparing for deployment.

He Yu…

Do you really…really have to be like this…?

I believe in you… He Yu…respond… I want to believe in you… I want to help you…

Give me your hand.

Just like you did beside the summer hydrangeas when you were a child—give me your hand, okay?

He Yu…

The ringing in his ears grew louder and louder. The dizziness intensified. It became impossible for him to hear anything clearly.

He did his best to maintain his lucidity, to keep himself from succumbing to his illness and losing consciousness, and so failed to notice a hand reach out and pick up his cell phone.

It was Director Hu.

As a veteran policeman, Director Hu was as decisive as he was ruthless. A master of verbal manipulation and psychological warfare, he harbored no personal feelings toward Xie Qingcheng or He Yu, so his usual pitiless brutality was on full display.

And in this moment, a new idea had struck him. “I would like to try something else,” he said. “May I borrow your phone, Professor Xie?”

Xie Qingcheng was so addled that he couldn’t hear what Director Hu was saying. Even his vision was a blur of color. But he was stoic even in suffering. Failing to notice his discomfort, Director Hu took his silence for tacit acquiescence.

He picked up Xie Qingcheng’s cell phone and quickly typed out a new message: one not written in the capacity of Xie Qingcheng, but rather a member of the police force.

The message read: *He Yu, I urge you to surrender. Xie Qingcheng is currently at the police station due to your involvement in this drug trafficking case. I know that to evade the police you are reluctant to expose your whereabouts by responding. You may even doubt the truth of my words. Of course, if you don’t care about Xie Qingcheng’s safety, you are welcome to doubt all you like. Remember: There is a rat within the police force who kills witnesses without batting an eye. Can you really afford to gamble on his life?*

Sensing that something was wrong, Xie Qingcheng fought back the dizziness and said, “Wait…”

Director Hu pressed enter.

“Wait!”

Finally snapping back to his senses, Xie Qingcheng reached for his phone—only to see the bright screen glaring “Sent” up at him.

It was too late. Xie Qingcheng turned deathly pale as he clutched his phone, breaking out in a cold sweat as he stared at the text on the screen.

“Director Hu, you cannot do this… You shouldn’t have lied to him.” Gathering himself, he began drafting another message. But the director stopped him.

“What are you doing?”

“I have to tell him the truth.”

“Absolutely not!” Director Hu shot him down instantly. “Time is of the essence; if you send him another text, the situation will only spiral even further out of control.”

Xie Qingcheng fell silent.

“We promise that, unless absolutely necessary, we will not use undue force when we arrest him. I know that you care about his trust in you, but you can rest assured that the police merely hope to prevent him from making an even greater mistake. We cannot afford to waste our efforts here. We must seize the opportunity to resolve this situation quickly.” He gazed at Xie Qingcheng steadily. “I promise, you can tell him the full truth once he responds, all right?”

Silence.

“But you can’t do that now. We cannot sacrifice any more lives.”

This last sentence seemed to weigh a thousand tons. Everyone turned to fix their eyes on Xie Qingcheng. Head pounding, he felt the tight grip he had on his cell phone slowly loosen. He couldn’t even hold it anymore…

We cannot sacrifice any more lives.

I know that you care about his trust in you, but the police merely hope to prevent him from making an ever greater mistake.

You can’t do that now…

“Xie Qingcheng, are you all right?” Wei-erge asked.

Xie Qingcheng slowly curled his fingers into a fist, ears ringing, his eyes beginning to blur once more. He could hardly breathe.

The present situation notwithstanding, Wei-erge still cared for his family. “Xie Qingcheng?” he repeated.

“I’m fine… I’m fine,” he insisted, even as his face had lost all color.

Wei-erge stared at him doubtfully. “Let’s wait, then.”

One minute, two minutes…

Everyone once again settled in to wait.

But still, there was only dead silence.

It seemed Director Hu’s attempt at psychological warfare had failed to breach the impregnable defenses of He Yu’s heart.

Commissar Wang was deeply disheartened. To think that these people would be so naive as to appeal to a suspected smuggler’s emotions in hopes that he would respond to their messages, when said smuggler was well aware that doing so would give himself away. What could he possibly expect? It would be better to pin his hopes on the police force in Guangshi breaking through He Yu’s antidetection software with their military-grade tech…

But just as he was about to storm out for a smoke, Xie Qingcheng’s dormant cell phone suddenly began to vibrate.

It was the most generic, default ringtone that played, yet it had nearly everyone jumping out of their seats, faces colored with shock. Beneath over a dozen gazes, the phone screen lit up dimly to display the caller ID of the incoming call.

Little Devil.

It was He Yu’s number, which had thus far been completely unresponsive… He Yu had actually called back, despite knowing that this was probably a trap!

Director Hu was extremely surprised. It was his plan, but in reality, he’d thought there was the barest 1 percent chance of it succeeding. He Yu was so smart—unless he truly cared about someone, there was no way he would concern himself with such a threatening message.

To think that he really would respond, just like that…

Director Hu instinctively reached to answer the call, but this time, Xie Qingcheng did not give him the phone.

They had to stop He Yu by any means, and under such extreme circumstances, they'd had no choice but to resort to such a drastic lie. He Yu actually calling back meant that Director Hu had accomplished his overall objective.

But He Yu was the only one who was being kept in the dark, and Xie Qingcheng was the only person here who cared about his feelings. Xie Qingcheng wouldn't allow anyone to deceive him again. He needed to personally explain the situation, so that He Yu would stop walking the wrong path for the sake of Lü Zhishu and the He family.

"Hello?"

He Yu's voice was frigid, cold enough to conceal his worry. "Who are you? Why did you take his phone?"

Enduring the excruciating illness racking his body, Xie Qingcheng hoarsely replied, "It's me."

The call went silent, as the person on the other end suddenly realized what was happening.

"He Yu, it's me."

He Yu made no response.

Before Xie Qingcheng could say anything else, the line went dead, and only the dial tone responded.

"The suspect has exposed his location! Contact Guangshi's intel analysis team immediately!"

"Data received! The GPS coordinates of the suspect's cell phone are __"

The younger police officers in the room cheered and clapped in excitement when they heard the news coming from the loudspeaker in real time. Everyone promptly returned to their positions and busied themselves with various tasks, preparing to begin pursuit for the arrest. Only Xie Qingcheng remained standing in place, his blood freezing in his veins…

He Yu had refused to provide them any explanation—refused to communicate with him in any way.

What was He Yu planning?! Had he really chosen to walk the path of darkness?!

Xie Qingcheng couldn’t believe it.

Despite everything, he still couldn’t believe that He Yu would make such a decision. But now, He Yu was indeed evading police pursuit, and he had indeed rejected his outstretched hand. Unlike that child who had once sat beside the summer hydrangeas, He Yu did not take his hand.

Back when he’d kept pushing He Yu away—perhaps that was when He Yu had begun to think for himself. He had never been the passive type. He was the smartest child Xie Qingcheng had ever seen, and had always excelled at hiding his emotions.

Meanwhile, in international waters, a pale-faced He Yu gripped his phone tightly as he stared out at the vast sea.

He was an evil dragon, and only Xie Qingcheng knew his weakness. Yet at the most critical moment, Xie Qingcheng had handed that sword to someone else, letting them stab him where he was most vulnerable.

He Yu closed his eyes, recalling their final conversation. Xie Qingcheng had said that he would stand against him.

He’d once thought that Xie Qingcheng would be somewhat reluctant to hurt him—that for once, he would forgive him for his willfulness—but evidently, that was not the case. Thinking back on those words now, He Yu felt only a silent agony, as if his heart were being rent in two.

About ten minutes later, a faint shadow appeared in the distance. “Executive He!” his assistant shouted anxiously, pointing at the silhouette. “It’s here! The ship from Mandela Island has arrived!”

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Chapter 187:
You Lied to Me!

A LARGE WHITE SHIP slowly pulled up next to them. After they'd verified each other's identity, a gangway was lowered between the vessels, and Duan Wen's subordinates crossed over.

This was the first time He Yu was interacting directly with the people working for Duan Wen. There were only about a dozen of them, seemingly all graceful women in red dresses in the style Jiang Liping had worn. Just as his assistant said, their faces were completely covered by specially designed silver masks, engraved with ornamental floral patterns and accompanied by an attached hood. It was only when the leader of their group began to speak, though, that He Yu realized what "specially designed" really meant. The woman's voice sounded distorted and mechanical. There was no way to tell what she actually sounded like.

"We are here on Executive Duan's orders to pick up the goods." The woman was taciturn in the extreme, cutting straight to the point without so much as a greeting. "Take me to the cargo bay."

"In that case, I ask that you hurry," He Yu said. "Executive Lü said that this batch is of vital importance to Executive Duan, and that the Australian market needs it urgently, so there can be no mistakes. However, my GPS coordinates were exposed to the police about ten minutes ago. They will arrive shortly, so you must quickly move the cargo and depart at once."

The woman remained shockingly calm. "Understood."

She followed He Yu to the cargo bay, her entourage trailing after her.

After using special instruments to inspect the goods, the women began to load up their ship at top speed. They were veterans in the field of theft and murder; though law enforcement could arrive at any moment, their movements remained neat and orderly, their formation wholly undisturbed.

When only a few boxes remained, He Yu turned to the leader of the group. "Duan Wen trusted that I would set aside our past enmity, and I have

done just that. I only ask that he honor our agreement upon receiving the goods."

The woman nodded. "Executive Duan always keeps his word. In light of your determination, he will surely help you develop a drug to treat—"

She was cut off by an explosion outside.

A wretched-looking member of the crew came barreling in. "E-Executive He!" he stuttered, pointing a trembling finger at the door. "Outside! E-en—" He was practically hyperventilating from fright, barely stringing together a full sentence. Swallowing hard, he finally cried, "Enemy attack!"

He Yu traded a look with the woman in red. "Follow me!" he said, quickly leading her through the back door of the cargo bay.

As expected, they were greeted by the arrival of the police. The officers had divided themselves into two teams, one pursuing the ship from Mandela Island, which had already loaded its cargo and weighed anchor. Duan Wen's scientists had clearly modified their vessel; it sped through the water quick as lightning as it began firing on its pursuers.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The Mandela ship swiftly broke through the police's offensive line, attacking without regard for human life. In a matter of moments, He Yu saw bullets send several coast guards tumbling into the sea. The Coast Guard cutter cruised at full speed, the flashing red and blue siren lights affixed before its mast blaring as it tore toward them with the deafening roar of a great whale breaking through the waves.

Not to be outdone, He Yu's massive vessel took off in the opposite direction of the Mandela ship, raising lofty waves and silver foam as it sliced through the water. When he glanced back at the cutter in his wake, he noted that the distance between them remained deadlocked. Adjusting his ship's telescope, he spotted coast guards setting up machine guns on the deck while the captain of the fleet shouted something into a maritime loudspeaker, a sonorous voice cutting through the roaring waves:

"This is the Coast Guard! Stop immediately and submit your ship for inspection! Stop immediately and submit your ship for inspection! Drop

your weapons and do not resist! Obey or face the consequences! Obey or face the consequences!”

The ship’s crew was composed of former underlings of Lü Zhishu’s illegal enterprise—that was to say, all desperate criminals who had their own way of dealing with this type of situation. It was He Yu’s first time leading them at sea, so naturally, there was no way they would follow all his orders without question. The captain knew that if he was caught by the Coast Guard, he—no, even if he wasn’t sentenced to death, he would have to serve at least twenty years in prison. He instructed his crew to continue sailing full speed ahead while preparing to fight back at any moment.

Bang!

There was no knowing who fired the first shot. The firefight that had only just died down began anew, and unlike the earlier warning shots, this second confrontation was much more intense. Bullets struck the hull of the ship, bouncing against steel bars and iron panels with loud clangs.

Swearing under his breath, He Yu tried to contact the captain with the microphone clipped to his collar. But with the situation devolving into chaos, the captain didn’t have any time or patience to spare for him.

The leader of the women in red cursed. “Reckless idiots.”

But what kind of desperate criminal *wasn’t* reckless? Under enemy fire, the Coast Guard had no choice but to fight back. He Yu watched as the Mandela vessel gradually pulled away from the pack while his own ship remained caught in a fierce battle with the authorities. An ominous feeling seized his heart.

Bang!

The floorboards bucked beneath his feet as the ship lurched from top speed to a sudden halt.

Something must have happened on the bridge—perhaps the captain had been shot, or the bridge had just been destroyed. This vessel wasn’t like the one that had been sent from Mandela Island. Although Lü Zhishu had made some modifications, it still had to set sail from a domestic seaport; she couldn’t do anything that would make it too conspicuous. How could it possibly withstand the firepower of a Coast Guard cutter?

The great ship stopped, but the gunfire only intensified. Some of the criminals on board began to fight for their lives while gutless others jumped into the ocean in an attempt to flee. The coast guard stepped up their attack as well, bullets raining down from both sides in a deadly shower as the distance between the two crafts continued to close.

He Yu and the woman in red found a place to hide from the dense gunfire. A short distance away, they could hear a sailor shooting back wildly as he sprinted across the deck. “I’ll kill you… I’ll kill you! I’ll fucking die before I surrender!”

Perhaps God really was watching, and in a playful mood no less, because the moment the man finished speaking a bullet struck him squarely in the chest.

“Ah!” Blood blossomed outward; the man convulsed and fell backward. The spray of bullets that had taken out the gangster veered toward He Yu and the woman in red, who both promptly ducked for cover.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The slugs struck a thick sheet of steel as the two narrowly avoided getting shot. Jumping to her feet, the woman turned to He Yu, waiting for him to lead them to safety—only to see his pale face pinch in an inexplicable grimace. He sucked in a breath. “Head for the stern,” he said. “There’s a lifeboat.”

“You’re not coming with me?” the woman asked in surprise. “Your actions today have more than proven that you made the right choice. You can return to Mandela Island with me, and I will truthfully report everything that has happened to Executive Duan. He will not treat you unfairly.”

“There’s still cargo on the ship,” He Yu said. “I need to get rid of it or the Coast Guard will take it into custody. If that happens, do you really think that Duan Wen will believe that I didn’t do it on purpose?”

The woman had no response to that.

The Coast Guard cutter drew closer and closer, but the crew of He Yu’s ship continued to resist, and the battle intensified even further. It was only a matter of time before another volley of bullets arrived.

The woman in red had no choice. After standing there for a few seconds longer, she swore under her breath and made a break for the stern. Once she was gone, He Yu slowly pulled himself upright with the help of a railing, only to stagger.

Drip…

A drop of blood splattered to the ground.

Drip…drip…

More fell, one after another.

He was hit.

When the gangster had been shot, a stray bullet shattered against the hull, and a piece of shrapnel had torn into his flesh and embedded itself into his lung.

He Yu gritted his teeth, face bloodless as he pressed a hand against his wound and slowly turned to make his way toward the cargo bay. The ship had ground to a complete stop, which meant the bridge was almost certainly destroyed. He could hear people wailing in terror and hurling epithets at their attackers outside. The acrid stench of sulfur and gunsmoke rolled across the sea and the heavy scent of fear lingered in the air.

But the atmosphere had no effect on him.

He slowly entered the cargo bay by himself.

It was filled with row upon row of shelves, so tall that it felt like walking through an abyss. Standing in the center of the cargo bay, cast in the feeble light streaming through the holes in the ceiling, He Yu closed his eyes. In this deserted place, his expression became one of eerie calm: the face of a madman.

He walked over to where the last of the goods were stored and finally sat down on a shipping container to catch his breath. His hands shook uncontrollably as he slowly took out his cell phone and unlocked the screen, still open to the last message that Xie Qingcheng had sent him. He Yu stared at the words, a touch of self-mockery in his red-rimmed eyes.

Aside from this message, which any normal person would have simply ignored, pretty much everything had gone according to plan. But he had gone ahead and responded to it, prematurely revealing his location.

The gunfire outside intensified, then became sporadic.

The loudspeaker sounded once more: “Enemy ship survivors, lay down your weapons and step out onto the deck! Those who resist or attempt to escape by jumping overboard will be shot on sight! I repeat, enemy ship survivors…”

He Yu set his phone aside and tilted his head back, face cast in dappled sunlight that spilled through the bullet holes in the ceiling.

It hurt.

But more terrifying than the hurt was the chilling numbness of his heart.

He Yu felt like he had been abandoned by the world, like a corpse slowly freezing over as it sank to the bottom of the sea.

It was over.

The police had found them, and were now in close pursuit of Duan Wen’s ship… Soon, everything would be over, and everyone would forget him.

He was going to die…

He breathed slowly, the salty tang of ocean air filling his lungs. One minute… Two minutes…

He was going to die…just like this, all alone…

It was then that his cell phone began to vibrate. The mellifluous melody felt like the rescue ship appearing at the end of *Titanic*, a beam of light piercing the darkness.

“Every night in my dreams, I see you…”

His eyes widened as he glanced down at the screen of the cell phone, his expression pulling taut and his entire body trembling, as if his heart had struck an iceberg.

Sure enough, the caller ID of the incoming call was Xie Qingcheng.

He pressed a shaking hand to his wound and didn’t answer. Since he didn’t answer, his cell phone continued to vibrate.

Once…

Twice…

“We’ll stay forever this way. You are safe in my heart…!”

He Yu stared at the screen, his vision blurring. It took a while for him to realize that he was crying, tears streaming unnoticed down his face. His shoulders shuddered as he listened to that tragic song, scenes from the past flashing before his eyes—

He and Xie Qingcheng, trapped in the flooded studio.

Xie Qingcheng kissing him amid a sea of fire.

Xie Qingcheng watching him calmly through the steam emanating from a hotpot.

Xie Qingcheng saying, “He Yu, happy birthday.”

He Yu, happy birthday.

He Yu pressed down on his wound as he laughed and cried. Fortunately he was alone, with no one there to see the hideous expression his face twisted into.

He could only guess how many times his cell phone rang before it finally went quiet.

A short while later, a message popped up on the screen.

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Hesitating for a moment, his face still wet with tears, he slowly reached out for his phone—

But before his fingers made contact, a drop of bright red fluid landed on the screen, obscuring the name of the sender.

Blood.

Panting shallowly, He Yu picked up his cell phone. He tried to wipe it clean, but all he managed to do was smear blood everywhere. The screen's fluorescent light shone on him, and the bloodstains that had been nigh invisible on his black shirt stood out in terrifyingly sharp relief.

It took three tries before he managed to swipe open his phone with trembling fingers, opening his conversation with Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng had sent him a new text: *He Yu, no matter what difficulties you have encountered, you can always talk to me. Don't resist the authorities and don't do these sorts of things again. I hope that you can come back.*

He Yu stared blankly at the last line, struck by a sudden and overwhelming urge to bawl. He felt so deeply wronged… He was only twenty years old. While other boys his age were busy playing games in their dorms and attending classes at university, he had to face this… He couldn't be willful or reckless, and although it certainly looked like he had the world in his hands, in reality, he was utterly powerless.

In that moment, he wished desperately to cry like any other normal boy, but the effort required to make the sound was beyond him. Every breath was laborious, wheezing out of him like a broken bellows.

He choked on a sob. He hated how Xie Qingcheng had lied to him—how easily Xie Qingcheng had chosen to stand against him. He knew that He Yu loved him, knew that He Yu would bare his most fatal weakness to him, and yet he still had the heart to stab him where he was most vulnerable—!

But…

Hot tears coursed down He Yu's cheeks as he stared at the bloodstained words on the screen.

But Xie Qingcheng hadn't given up on him completely…

Despite everything, Xie Qingcheng still called him repeatedly, and said that he hoped he could come back…

And now, he had finished all that he needed to do. Even though—

He Yu looked down at the blood gushing from his abdomen, a visual reminder that he had to seize the opportunity to live on…that he couldn't allow things to end this way, that he shouldn't surrender just like that…

That man… He must still care about you…

He must be waiting for you to tell him the whole truth. He must be…

The phone rang again—it was still Xie Qingcheng's number.

He Yu's tears spilled over once more as the desire to survive erupted from his heart like molten lava and surged through his dazed mind. He was like a wounded puppy, whimpering as he reached out and pressed a trembling finger to the answer button—

"He Yu!" Xie Qingcheng's voice burst through, a direct appeal to He Yu's heart. "You really… You…"

He Yu clutched at his phone as if it were Xie Qingcheng's outstretched hand. "Xie-ge," he called out softly, in a hoarse and broken voice.

Xie Qingcheng's voice was warped by anger, anxiety, and some other indecipherable emotion. "Where are you? Get out of there now! Are you stupid?!"

He Yu was about to ask for help when the door to the cargo bay swung open with a bang.

A dazzling light shone in, illuminating a search team made up of the Coast Guard, Guangshi Police Department officers, and members of the local SWAT team, all training the muzzles of their guns straight at He Yu.

"Freeze!"

"Hands up! Put down your weapons!"

Their orders meant little to He Yu, as he wasn't carrying any lethal weapons to begin with, nor did he intend to resist. He knew that they wouldn't shoot him at will, so he simply waited for them to come and take him back.

That was right. He had to do his best to get back alive…

There were still so many things he wanted to say to Xie Qing-cheng.

There was the truth buried deep in his heart. He had to survive, had to find a way to tell everyone.

He—

When he looked up, he caught sight of a familiar figure among the officers.

He Yu froze.

His blood, which had been roiling like lava in his heart, cooled in an instant, and his desire to live—so fervent a moment ago—faded with it.

His ears rang. His vision blurred. He suddenly realized why Xie Qingcheng would willingly hand over his cell phone to the police, why he would take advantage of He Yu's affections to tell such a ridiculous lie, one that no one but He Yu would believe.

He was so stupid… When he saw Xie Qingcheng's message, he'd actually deluded himself into thinking that Xie Qingcheng cared about him, that perhaps Xie Qingcheng had no choice but to do such a thing! He thought that Xie Qingcheng really was doing this for his sake; that was, until he saw that one police officer assigned to this mission—

Chen. Yan.

Chen Yan!

To think that Chen Yan was a member of the team dispatched to arrest him…

Xie Qinghcheng…was doing this to protect *him*…

Xie Qingcheng was actually doing this for *him*, wasn't he?!

It felt like thorns stabbing through his heart.

He Yu's bloodshot eyes stared menacingly at that man… That man… was so bright.

He wore a gleaming police badge, surrounded by his comrades. He could stand with dignity and openly seek justice in the sun and have people worrying for his safety…

He had everything that He Yu lacked.

He envied him.

He truly…*truly* envied him!

Sighting down his gun, Chen Man saw He Yu's piercing gaze staring back at him like a wolf, a tiger, a panther…like some kind of inhuman beast. He Yu's bloodstained lips curved into a cold, crazed smile, as disturbed as it was distraught.

"Ha ha…ha ha ha ha…" He Yu threw his head back and began to laugh. The laugh wasn't particularly loud—he lacked the strength—but that couldn't prevent him from expressing his madness. "Ah ha ha ha ha ha…!"

"He Yu? He Yu, what's wrong? What's happening over there? You —!" Xie Qingcheng's voice rang out from the cell phone.

Closing his eyes, He Yu gritted his teeth so hard he nearly ground his molars to dust. Suddenly, he smothered that crazed smile and ended his final call with Xie Qingcheng.

Liar…

Liar!

He didn't want to hear it anymore…

He didn't want to hear anything anymore!

He Yu lifted his head, eyes ruthless as he regarded the people before him with an eerie calm.

Several members of law enforcement had already died over the course of this mission. Chen Man was furious, but his anger no longer stemmed from personal grudges. Instead it was a sense of general principle.

"He Yu, look what you've done… You bastard…!"

The final vestiges of He Yu's crazed smile faded as he slowly struggled to his feet. How important was the truth? If he himself didn't care, then how important could it be? He opened his palms with a shrug, the picture of arrogance, madness, and pain. "That's right, I did it all. I stood by my family—what's wrong with that? Go ahead and kill me. Do it, Officer Chen—I want you to shoot me yourself."

Chen Man set his finger against the trigger. He hated him so much… He truly wanted to shoot He Yu to death… He wanted to kill him, wanted to see his blood splatter across the ground, wanted him to die immediately!

But how could he possibly shoot an unarmed, dying man who was already visibly, gravely injured? How could he—

Whirr…

Chen Man's ears seemed to ring with the intensity of his hatred—his vision clouded over, as if something was casting a deep shadow.

Bang!

A deafening explosion tore through the cargo bay.

Chen Man's head snapped up, his eyes going wide. No—that shadow and the ringing in his ears weren't figments of his imagination! He stared in disbelief, his face pale, a chill lancing through his blood before his vision blacked out.

It happened suddenly and without warning.

What's going on… How could this happen?! What—

Boom!

Fire erupted. Darkness crashed down like a landslide. The redness of blood entwined with the blackness of death as the world descended into chaos.

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Chapter 188:
The Truth Left Behind

"THREE DAYS AGO, while investigating a major case in international waters, the Guangshi Police Department was engaged in a firefight with members of a crime syndicate. The clash resulted in a significant number of casualties, with at least forty-three dead and four missing. The case…"

The news continued playing on the radio.

It had been three days since the naval battle.

Xie Qingcheng had dreamed of that same amusement park three nights in a row.

Just like before, he was trapped inside that tattered teddy bear. He stood woodenly in place, holding a bunch of colorful balloons that no one wanted as he watched people coming down from the Ferris wheel.

His parents, Lao-Qin, Xie Xue…

The Ferris wheel kept spinning and spinning before slowly coming to a stop. The laughter and lights faded as a familiar figure stepped off of the ride. He Yu walked up to him, his expression touched by something like sadness, watching him in silence.

Then he asked, "Ge, why did you lie to me?"

Silence. Xie Qingcheng wanted to speak, but he could make no sound.

The boy gazed at him. "I truly loved you. You told such a clumsy lie. I only fell for it because I cared about you so much… But you lied to me… You lied to me."

Silence.

"Xie-ge, I have to go."

Silence.

"I'm going far away and never coming back."

Silence.

“I’ve lived in this world for twenty years, and I’ve spent those twenty years working hard; but still, in the end no one treats me with sincerity. I’m truly a failure. Xie Qingcheng… I’m leaving. Before I leave, can you—”

He suddenly stopped speaking, his eyes turning bloodshot as hatred warred with heartbreak on his face. The boy did not ask anything more of him, nor did he step forward to hug the tattered teddy bear. He merely stared at him in silence, the colorful neon lights of the amusement park flickering eerily behind him.

—Can you hold me?

This time, he did not give voice to that oft-asked question. There was only silence. He had expended the last of his energy, even sacrificed his life, to love someone in hopes of being loved in return, but still received no response.

The flame on the little Charmander’s tail finally burned out. He no longer had the strength to ask for one last hug from his kin.

At last, after staring deeply into his eyes one last time, he turned around and walked down the same path as Xie Qingcheng’s parents and Qin Ciyan by himself. His figure faded into the distance until he disappeared.

Xie Qingcheng wanted to call out his name, wanted to ask him to stop, but he couldn’t make a sound… He couldn’t say anything…

He Yu…

He Yu!

“He Yu—!”

Xie Qingcheng bolted upright in his bed, chest heaving.

His vision was filled with a vast expanse of white.

This wasn’t his home—Xie Qingcheng hadn’t been staying at Moyu Alley for the past few days. He was staying in a specially designated Ministry of Public Security break room for people temporarily cooperating with law enforcement.

The radio on the table droned on with its detailed report of the naval battle that had transpired three days previous. This was the first time there

had been a direct confrontation between the police and Duan Wen's organization. No one had expected Duan Wen to possess such advanced weaponry.

After delivering its cargo, the ship from Mandela Island had abruptly turned around to rejoin the fray just as the police officers were about to arrest the suspect, He Yu. As the massive ship plunged back toward the battle, the light aircraft that was parked in its hangar took off, launching a suicide attack on the Coast Guard cutter and the officers aboard the He vessel.

What had seemed to be the battle's inevitable conclusion was reversed in an instant as blood rained from the sky, gunsmoke filled the air, and bodies fell by the dozen. The sea grew tempestuous as blood dyed its waters red.

Chen Man had survived, but he was heavily wounded.

The reinforcements from the Coast Guard found him amid the debris of the cargo bay, which had suffered a direct attack and collapsed completely. The charred space was littered with mutilated corpses. Some had their heads blown off, while others were still burning when the rescue team arrived. By the time the fires were put out, the blackened bodies were completely unrecognizable.

The tragedy attracted national attention; the case was upgraded to a major criminal investigation, with the He Group placed under intense scrutiny. All relevant individuals were summoned for interrogation in accordance with the law, and all properties owned by the He family were seized overnight, including the old He family manor, which was turned upside down by the authorities in search of evidence.

Things had blown up so far that many of the details could no longer be kept under wraps. Xie Qingcheng had no idea how many secrets the police had uncovered—not that he had time to worry about it either way. He had spent the past several days cooperating with the authorities in their investigation, his heart going numb as body after body was identified. Perhaps that was the reason he was suffering such nightmares.

Xie Qingcheng reached out a trembling hand, willing himself to calm down.

Ding-dong!

The doorbell sounded.

"…Please come in."

It was Wei-erge, followed by a number of police officers. In this dimly lit room, without his glasses, Xie Qingcheng couldn't make out their expressions at all. But he could sense a strange oppressiveness in the air, as if everyone was concerned that he might go crazy and lose all sense of reason.

Xie Qingcheng's heart quickened as he broke out in a cold sweat, a foreboding feeling rising in his chest.

"…What is it?" he asked at last.

Wei-erge walked up to him and sat down beside his bed, a large manila envelope in his hand. "I have two pieces of news," he said. "The first is something that you won't want to hear, while the second is something that someone doesn't want you to know. However, I think that we need to tell you both—this case has gotten too big for me to take your personal sentiments into consideration, and we have to prioritize the bigger picture. It doesn't matter if you are willing, or if you want to hear this. Do you understand what I mean?"

This appeared to be an attempt at preparing Xie Qingcheng for what was to come.

"Tell me the one that I don't want to hear first," said Xie Qingcheng.

After a few long, drawn out seconds, Wei-erge said, "A new list of deaths from the naval battle were confirmed today."

Xie Qingcheng went still.

"His name was among them."

Who was he talking about? Whose name was on the list? Wei-erge did not clarify, as if certain that Xie Qingcheng knew who he was talking about.

"He's dead."

Xie Qingcheng made no response. Wei-erge stared intently at his face.

“He Yu’s dead.”

The pin-drop silence stretched out between them. Minutes slipped by…yet Xie Qingcheng’s sickly face remained blank. It was as if he had no heart; even the falling of a thousand-pound boulder wouldn’t rouse a single ripple of emotion.

He did not lose his composure. He was not shocked. There was no reaction at all, merely a terrifying calm.

No one could get a glimpse into his heart.

Wei-erge was shaken, but he tentatively continued, “The ship was reduced to rubble, but the forensics team found a severed limb among the debris and DNA analysis confirmed it was his. One of the survivors rescued today also confirmed that he saw He Yu get hit by an explosive device. We can affirm that he is indeed dead.”

Xie Qingcheng’s lowered lashes were perfectly still.

“…Xie Qingcheng, are you all right?”

Actually…was this result at all surprising?

No, it wasn’t. Those who were still alive had been saved on the very first day, with only the occasional lucky survivor turning up over the next two. All other news had been about the dead.

The amusement park’s colorful neon lights seemed to flash before Xie Qingcheng’s eyes.

He…wasn’t surprised at all.

Not in the least.

The sad boy from his dream seemed to be standing right in front of him. “I’ve lived in this world for twenty years,” he said, “and I’ve spent those twenty years working hard; but still, in the end no one treats me with sincerity. I’m truly a failure. Xie Qingcheng… I’m leaving. Before I leave, can you…”

Was it a dream? Or were there really human souls that haunted this world?

He resented Xie Qingcheng for lying to him and didn’t want to leave without a proper farewell. Was that why he had visited his dreams before

Wei-erge came to find him?

Grief welled in his heart.

“Xie Qingcheng?”

“…I’m fine. I’m fine.”

It was a long time before Xie Qingcheng spoke again. At last, he said woodenly, “The second piece of news—what is it?”

Wei-er’s expression grew even more inscrutable. He hesitated a moment before handing Xie Qingcheng the manila envelope. “The police found these tucked inside a book at the old He family home. The contents are a bit difficult to explain, so it’s best if you just read it yourself.”

Opening the envelope, Xie Qingcheng found a stack of documents alongside a—

A letter.

A final letter, written by He Yu.

Strangely, the letter was not addressed to any one person; rather, the letter opened with: *To my comrades in the police force…*

Hands trembling, Xie Qingcheng struggled to compose himself. Pale-faced, nails digging deep into his palms, he took the sheaf of paper and slowly began to read.

The letter was very long, but it didn’t address how to go about dealing with He Yu’s personal affairs after his death. Instead, it was more like a statement written to assist the police, one explaining the detailed background behind the case.

He Yu wrote: *To be honest, I hope this letter won’t actually come in handy. I’m only twenty years old; I have someone that I love, and I don’t want to die yet. However, there are some things I have to do. There are some who have waited for the truth for too long, and I finally have the opportunity to get closer to that truth. I have no choice but to take this risk.*

He Yu’s handwriting was beautiful, formed from vigorous strokes that were very different from Xie Qingcheng’s own firm, unyielding script.

As everyone knows, my father, He Jiwei, recently passed away from illness. He was suffering from depression and swallowed herbicide,

resulting in pulmonary fibrosis. After enduring a week of excruciating agony, he ultimately departed this world. Nearly everyone, including Lü Zhishu, his wife of twenty years, believes his mental illness was due to his inability to bear the overwhelming pressures of his work.

However, this is not the truth.

Having been saved from his initial suicide attempt, my father lived for another seven days. I met with him once during those seven days. He was unusually clearheaded at the time, and determined to tell me something he had uncovered in his investigation into a past incident. That knowledge, and the intense shame he felt at facing the truth, had been torturing him for months.

This past incident—the knowledge of which tormented him to death—has to do with my mother.

My mother, Lü Zhishu, was once a student working in my father's laboratory some twenty years ago. They were both very young, but they already firmly believed that the other was the love of their life, and although they had yet to formally marry, my mother soon became pregnant with me. While she was pregnant, my mother had an accident while watching over an experiment in the laboratory…

Xie Qingcheng flipped to the next page. He Yu briefly summarized the incident that led to him developing psychological Ebola, explaining how, in trying to protect him, his kind and gentle mother became completely unrecognizable due to the side effects of the experimental drug.

At the time, my father thought that she had simply suffered too big a shock, that the rapid deterioration of her appearance terrified her and caused her to regret her decision, that the dramatic change in her personality was a consequence of the combined effects of postpartum depression and the way people now treated her… Thus, he did his best to be understanding toward the stranger aspects of her behavior. He requested that I try to accept her.

However, he still had his doubts, and those doubts accumulated year after year. Noticing all sorts of strange details in her everyday life, he finally decided to figure out what it was that she was hiding.

The truth that he discovered caused him to suffer a mental breakdown, as he finally realized that the woman who had been with him for twenty years—this Lü Zhishu—wasn't the person with whom he had fallen in love. She wasn't the woman who had endured unspeakable agony to protect their child, the woman who gave birth to me. She was someone else.

This "Lü Zhishu" is fake. Her true name is "Wei Rong."

Xie Qingcheng's pupils contracted as his hands began to tremble. The horrifying truth continued to silently unfold on the letter paper:

Twenty years ago, Wei Rong fell madly in love with my father. Born into a rich family, she was certain that a promising young entrepreneur with no background like my father would choose her as his life partner. Thus, she declared her love to him, only for him to reject her.

My father told Wei Rong that he was already dating Vivian (my mother, the true Lü Zhishu), a fellow student of the same research institute, and that Vivian was already pregnant with his child. Although he was still too young to apply for a marriage license,[1] he and Vivian had already talked things over and decided to keep the child. Once he reached marriageable age, they would hold the wedding.

He had no idea that this would lead Wei Rong to hate my mother. She despised Vivian, thinking that she was nothing more than an ordinary student who used her slightly-above-average looks to seduce men. Wei Rong already disliked her kindness and innocence, but after she learned my parents were due to be married, she was completely consumed by her jealousy.

We have no way of knowing if Wei Rong ever tried to redeem her soul back then. Shortly thereafter, she agreed to an arranged marriage set up by her family; she even invited my parents to her wedding. As a consequence, my parents were not wary of her at all. It is difficult to say whether this marriage was an attempt to find her own way of living or merely a facade.

At this point, the handwriting on the letter grew slightly misshapen—the pen had stabbed holes through the paper in a few places. He Yu's emotional state while he had written this section was quite evident.

Shortly thereafter, my mother accidentally came into contact with a virus while working in her lab. In retrospect, this was likely Wei Rong's doing.

The virus caused my mother great suffering, but she refused to give up on my life. Perhaps due to women's intuition, she instinctively knew that Wei Rong was trying to harm her, but unfortunately, she had no evidence. When she told people about her concerns, they all thought she was simply too anxious. My father comforted her, but even he didn't believe that someone would dare commit that kind of crime in broad daylight.

Overwhelmed with anxiety, my mother fled Huzhou. She wanted to go somewhere Wei Rong couldn't find her to give birth to her baby. By then, she had developed some mental health issues, and in the end she ran off to Yanzhou by herself. She was in a strange city with no friends or family; she didn't even bring enough money, all the while having to hide from the people who were hunting her down to harm the child in her belly. She was exhausted, starving, unkempt, and running a fever to boot…but just as she reached the end of her rope, she encountered a pair of officers from the Yanzhou Police Department.

Xie Qingcheng's eyes widened as he read two familiar names—

Xie Ping and Zhou Muying.

He Yu's handwriting became much neater here. He had carefully inscribed their names stroke by stroke.

I mention these two officers by name because I hope that after I die, you can use this evidence to carefully investigate these past events. They have been denied justice for twenty years. I hope that the living can rectify this error and help overturn the verdict regarding their cause of death. Indeed, in this letter, I hereby identify the person who orchestrated the deaths of Xie Ping, Zhou Muying, and my mother, Vivian. It was the vice-executive of the He Group, Lü Zhishu—that is to say, Wei Rong.

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Chapter 189:
The Fallen Talisman

ACCORDING TO HE YU'S LETTER, Vivian, the real Lü Zhishu, had tried to run away on multiple occasions, but every time, she had been found and brought back. It was during her final escape attempt that she met Zhou Muying.

The specific details of their encounter were a mystery, but it wasn't difficult to guess that, as a mother and a police officer, Zhou Muying would notice a young mother so obviously in distress. It was all too likely that when she saw a miserable-looking Vivian stumbling along, Zhou Muying would have approached to ask if she was okay.

Vivian likely felt unwell, and probably had very little money left. Perhaps Zhou Muying treated her to a meal, or perhaps she booked a hotel room so that Vivian could rest. Whatever the case, after interacting with her for a while, Vivian realized that this female officer meant her no harm. In this fragile moment, Vivian's emotions would finally spill over, and she told Zhou Muying everything that had happened.

Perhaps Vivian simply wanted to vent her emotions and didn't really expect Officer Zhou to help her. After all, she didn't have any evidence to back up her claims, and it was precisely because no one would believe her that she fled Huzhou.

But given the events that followed, we can see that Zhou Muying chose to believe my mother.

No one knew how these two young women communicated with each other and established a sense of trust. But Zhou Muying was an extremely gentle police officer whose kindness and sincerity could move even a seasoned escort like Li Miaoqing. It was easy to believe that Vivian would lower her guard.

The two mothers were both already gone from this world, so no one would ever know what happened back then. But the living could catch a glimpse of it through something that Vivian had left behind in death. He

Jiwei had stumbled across it during his investigation: a postcard that Vivian sent to Zhou Muying.

It was dated shortly before Vivian gave birth. She had no idea that Zhou Muying had recently passed away. Because the recipient had died, the police had placed it in a file box when they'd received it.

Under ordinary circumstances, a personal postcard would have been thrown out, but Zhou Muying made a habit of treating the people in her daily life very well. Saddened by the sight of this postcard which would never reach its recipient, one of the aunties in Zhou Muying's office tucked it into her case file, which was then sealed in the archive room alongside all the other unsolved cold cases. This was how He Jiwei had the opportunity to find this twenty-year-old postcard addressed to Zhou Muying from his wife.

The message on the postcard was very simple: Vivian had invited Xie Qingcheng's parents to bring their son and daughter to visit her home after she had given birth.

She wrote: *Thank you both for helping me. I look forward to seeing Zhou-jiejie and your husband, as well as Qingcheng and Xiao-Xue.*

In her message, she called Zhou Muying "Zhou-jiejie."

She had even written Xie Qingcheng's name. An indescribable feeling rose within him at the thought of He Yu's birth mother having once written the characters for "Qingcheng" stroke by stroke, while she was still alive.

The letter continued: *After seeing the twenty-year-old postcard, my father recalled a memory of Zhou Muying and her husband Xie Ping. Yes, he had met them before too, and he was certain that, after making Vivian's acquaintance, Officers Zhou and Xie had encountered Wei Rong in a certain club in Yanzhou as well.*

The meeting was extremely difficult to set up. Wei Rong considered her position as the daughter of a high-ranking official to be a point of pride, and believed the likes of Xie Ping and Zhou Muying were beneath her. It was only when they told her that the girl she had been looking for on behalf of the He family was with them that Wei Rong agreed to meet the two police officers.

On the day of their meeting, Zhou Muying asked Wei Rong several difficult questions and recorded her responses. Her questions exposed Wei Rong's true colors. With no way to explain herself, she promptly flew into a rage and got into a physical altercation with Zhou Muying. Perhaps she had been planning on taking my mother away, but in any case, during her clash with Zhou Muying, she dropped her earring…

Evidently, Zhou Muying had already determined that Wei Rong couldn't be trusted. Vivian wasn't delusional; Wei Rong was indeed trying to harm her. After this encounter, Zhou Muying personally escorted Vivian back to Huzhou, where she reported the matter to He Jiwei. That was why He Yu's father knew the truth.

But my father told me this story before.

He even told me that my mother had always thought I was infected by the virus because she hadn't protected me properly. When my father told me this story, he made no mention of Wei Rong. Perhaps he had already grown suspicious then, but he preferred to continue lying to himself rather than face the truth.

It wouldn't be surprising if He Jiwei had harbored misgivings. After all, he had once suspected Wei Rong, and nearly glimpsed the truth. When he found out that Wei Rong was likely the one who had hurt his wife, he was as shocked as he was angry. Zhou Muying and Xie Ping promised that they would get to the bottom of this, and that they would inform He Jiwei the moment they obtained evidence to ensure that justice was served. He Jiwei had thanked them and promised to stay by Vivian's side, to take good care of her.

It didn't take long for Xie Ping and Zhou Muying to be reported, framed, and demoted, before ultimately dying in an accident involving an exploding truck. My father immediately wondered if the perpetrator was Wei Rong. Worried that my mother—by then heavily pregnant—would become inconsolable, he kept the news a secret from her. After considering the situation at length, he decided to go to the police.

But the night before he steeled himself to file a police report, something unexpected happened that completely dispelled his suspicions and caused him to think that perhaps he was wrong, that it was all just a coincidence. There was another car accident, and Wei Rong was dead.

There was no reason for my father to be wary of a dead person. Shortly thereafter, Vivian gave birth to me in Huzhou. These events happened in rapid succession. My father barely had any time to catch his breath, let alone think deeply about all that had happened. And as he was immersed in the joy of being a new father, he shoved all of his doubts to the back of his mind.

The next paragraph covered the things that He Yu told Xie Qingcheng when they met. After marriage, his mother's appearance began to deteriorate, and her personality changed drastically.

The letter continued: *Over the years, my father's attitude toward her shifted from boundless affection to pale sympathy. It wasn't because of the change in her appearance, but because he gradually realized that his wife had become a completely different person.*

They had once had many topics of common interest, but in time they came to have nothing to talk about. He had once loved her forthrightness, but now, he could only see her unctuousness. He always accommodated her and catered to her every whim, adhering to her preferences with every decision. This continued even after the birth of their second child. Lü Zhishu adored their younger son, and because he loved his wife, he did his best to follow her example…but day after day, he gradually realized that she would never turn back into the woman she once was; that she had changed into a complete stranger.

I believe that the seed of suspicion was planted in his mind early on. However, he never dared to inquire after the truth, because subconsciously he already knew that the truth would be impossible for him to bear.

It's difficult for a person to admit past mistakes, and even more so for a person to admit that what they are currently doing is wrong. He had been hiding from that invisible specter, and would have continued doing so if not for a recent series of events: the murder of Huang Zhilong's wife at her husband's hands, the illegal development and production of obedience potion, cross-border drug research, inventions that were far more advanced than even the most cutting-edge technology… These incidents forced him into a corner, corroborating the theory in his heart. He could no longer feign ignorance, and finally decided to uncover the truth of years past. As Wei Rong's direct superior, Vivian's husband, and someone who had known

Xie Ping and Zhou Muying in life, he had more clues at his disposal than anyone else. Thus, he pieced together the puzzle and finally saw the whole picture of what happened that year—

Xie Qingcheng flipped to the next page.

As it turns out, back when Wei Rong was still in school, she had already attracted the attention of a particular Australian cross-border criminal research organization due to her excellent grades and good family background. The organization provided her numerous benefits, and their values aligned with her own, so Wei Rong soon became a member.

The leaders of the organization were all individuals who had engaged in some form of quid pro quo. For instance, in the case of Huang Zhilong, the organization helped cover up his murder of his wife. In doing so, they showed off their vast capabilities, but also made Huang Zhilong their coconspirator, thus binding him irrevocably to the organization itself. Wei Rong was the same. The dirty deeds that bound her and the organization together included murder, murder of law enforcement, secret plastic surgery… In short, the organization used advanced technology to help her successfully steal someone's identity.

It was a meticulous plan that would endure the test of time.

When Wei Rong learned that Zhou Muying and Xie Ping were investigating her over Vivian's accident, she immediately reported it to the organization to seek their help. To evade justice and fulfill her wish of marrying the man she loved, while getting rid of that beloathed "penniless bitch Vivian," Wei Rong worked with the organization to orchestrate a series of shocking events.

They first used their connections to threaten Xie Ping and Zhou Muying, the officers who had obtained firsthand evidence, with demotion. When they continued the investigation undeterred, the organization escalated their tactics by killing the officers with an exploding truck. The organization then helped Wei Rong fake her death before He Jiwei could report the case to the police and provide even more evidence.

Although Wei Rong was highborn, the old man at the head of the Wei family was an incredibly upstanding and law-abiding veteran cadre. There was no way he would protect Wei Rong if he found out she had committed murder.

Furthermore, the identity the organization had arranged for Wei Rong was not at all low, as they hoped that upon assuming her new role she would become the head of their mainland drug testing and manufacturing headquarters for the long term. Comparatively speaking, the identity of the woman known as “Wei Rong” was no longer as appealing, so Wei Rong “died” according to plan.

Her death was designed to be extremely brutal: After a head-on collision, her car exploded, and her body was practically reduced to ash. In those days, forensic science was still very rudimentary. The forensic pathologists responsible for the case only had simple instruments at their disposal; how could they possibly outsmart an advanced Australian science syndicate? As expected, the results of their autopsy stated that it was Wei Rong herself who had died.

But in reality, the real Wei Rong was hiding out in one of the organization’s private villas in Huzhou, undergoing a shocking transformation via plastic surgery. The surgeons used drugs and other tools developed by the organization to achieve transformative results far beyond anything ordinary society could access.

A few days later, Wei Rong recovered from her procedure.

When she stepped out of the solution tank, dripping wet, she saw an exquisitely beautiful body, ink-dark hair draping over shoulders like black silk to cover a naked chest. The woman in the mirror widened her beautiful almond eyes, revealing a surprised yet ecstatic expression—

She looked identical to Vivian, He Jiwei’s wife.

This horrifying face-swapping operation seemed like something out of a science fiction movie. Now that she’d changed her skin, Wei Rong waited in the villa with her chauffeur like a venomous snake, ready to slither out of her cave at any moment.

Her chance finally arrived.

A few days before Vivian’s due date was the birthday of the Wei family’s third young master Wei Dongheng. An invitation to the celebration was sent to He Jiwei, now an emerging figure in the field of pharmaceutical sciences.

As he had already made quite a name for himself, his laboratory was growing rapidly, but he had yet to reach his future status as Executive He. There was no way he could reject the Wei family's invitation. Only a madman or an idiot would even consider it—every businessman in Huzhou knew that.

And so He Jiwei attended the banquet.

Vivian had been using RN-13 to save her pregnancy. Out of options and desperate for a solution, she and He Jiwei were willing to try anything. They had no idea that even the recommendation of this miracle cure had been deliberately arranged by the organization. On the day of the banquet, the researcher who was secretly a member of the organization swapped Vivian's dose of RN-13 for a labor-inducing drug, causing her water to break. She was immediately taken to a hospital that the researcher had arranged in advance, who stood by as she gave birth.

And just like that, the cuckoo took over the nest.

In the delivery room of that private hospital, Vivian gave birth to a baby boy. She tearfully asked the doctor to answer her husband's call—at that moment, He Jiwei was still racing toward the hospital.

"I want to call him He Yu… He's the most wonderful child—a gift bestowed upon us by the heavens… Do you remember? We decided ages ago that we would call him He Yu…"

"All right, all right! Stop talking, I'm almost there! I'm almost there!"

He Jiwei never could have imagined that this would be the last conversation he would have with the real Vivian.

The mother was young, and the baby's position was ideal, so it was a very quick delivery. Afterward, she was to be taken to the intensive care unit for additional monitoring. Vivian closed her eyes in exhaustion. A pair of hands landed on the side rails of her bed, pushing her toward the stretcher elevator. Vivian didn't notice where the person accompanying her was sending them.

The elevator button pushed wasn't for the ICU, but for B2—the sub-basement level for the morgue.

Long before her procedure began, the researcher used the earliest rendition of the obedience potion to hypnotize the medical staff, executing the murder with brutal efficiency and covertness.

Meanwhile, Wei Rong, who had taken on the appearance of Vivian as she looked immediately after giving birth, lay down on a gurney.

The elevator doors opened once more, and the gurney entered.

The elevator's ascension brought a sense of weightlessness. Hooked up to various tubes and a breathing mask, Wei Rong looked ghastly pale. However, it wasn't because she'd just given birth. It was from an overwhelming sense of excitement and guilt.

She opened her eyes and stared up at the cold white lights.

The researcher sent from the organization stood by her bed and murmured softly into her ear. "Miss Wei, once we leave this elevator, the past will be written off in a single stroke. You must remember, you are Lü Zhishu, He Jiwei's wife and He Yu's mother. You are Vivian."

She nodded, clutching tightly at her own ice-cold hands.

With a *ding*, the doors opened once more, and she was pushed out of the elevator.

Thanks to the organization, no one suspected a thing. She was taken to a room in the intensive care unit where a nurse took over moving her bed. They very professionally went through their usual questions, the ones asked of every woman who was checked into the ICU after giving birth. "Your name?"

Wei Rong opened and closed her mouth beneath the breathing mask, heart pounding like an invisible war drum in her chest.

"Lü Zhishu," she said. "My name is Lü Zhishu."

Thus, the curtains rose on a lie that would span twenty years.

He Jiwei has left behind evidence regarding everything that I have mentioned so far.

Seeing Xie Qingcheng's eyes linger on this page, Wei-erge said, "We interrogated Lü Zhishu and the information that she divulged matches what's written in this letter."

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. He had only read a brief handful of pages, yet he felt completely drained.

“A quick, full-body plastic surgery procedure allowed the fake Lü Zhishu to temporarily attain Vivian’s physical appearance, but the techniques used were still underdeveloped,” Wei-erge explained. “As time went by, her false appearance rapidly deteriorated, which made her increasingly anxious. She desperately wanted Vivian’s beauty, but she also loathed everything Vivian had left behind. He Jiwei mentioned that once she destroyed a number of old belongings in a fit of madness. At the time, he thought that something had mentally triggered her, but in reality, she really only wanted to destroy all traces of the original Vivian.”

Xie Qingcheng recalled He Yu telling him about this incident. “*My mother burned nearly everything she had from before I was born. Her clothes, her photos…*”

He Yu had also mentioned that back when she was younger, his mother loved to wear retro Hong Kong-style red dresses. She loved the color red in general, but she stopped wearing it entirely after she gave birth to He Yu. In contrast, the old man who worked at the villa that served as the venue for Wei family weddings had confirmed that Wei Rong hated red.

But in reality, she didn’t hate the color red so much as she hated Vivian… Everything matched up.

“It’s not hard to understand her attitude,” Wei-erge said. “On the one hand, she desperately wanted to have everything that Vivian had, and to become He Yu’s birth mother. On the other, she looked down on He Yu’s real mother, who came from an ordinary background. It wasn’t enough for her to kill the real Vivian; she wanted to erase all traces of her existence. The only thing she couldn’t erase was He Yu. She needed to act like his mother, needed to mold him completely into her own child, but at the same time, she didn’t want to see the shadow of Vivian in him. He Yu had been living in such a twisted family environment for the past twenty years…”

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. He knew that better than anyone.

Wei-erge paused briefly before continuing. “When He Jiwei finally told He Yu the full story, he probably expressed the immense guilt and regret that he felt, but it was all too late. The fake Lü Zhishu had deceived him for so long. The two of them even had a child born of their own flesh

and blood: He Yu's younger brother, He Li. Out of consideration for his 'wife's' feelings, he followed her lead and spoiled He Li for years while distancing himself from Vivian's actual son. The woman he solemnly married two years after He Yu's birth in a long overdue wedding ceremony wasn't the girl that he loved at all. It was Wei Rong, the murderess responsible for Vivian's death. He Jiwei loved Vivian more than anything in this world, far more than he loved He Yu. That was why he succumbed to illness only a matter of months after learning the truth.

"The pain of realization broke him completely. Overwhelmed with disgust, fear, and grief, there was nothing he could do. He didn't even know whether he should reveal the truth to the rest of the world… He nearly went mad. In an attempt to escape it all, and as a consequence of his intense self-loathing, he chose to commit suicide by drinking herbicide."

Xie Qingcheng squeezed his eyes shut tight. "It was very difficult for him to confirm the truth…because Lü Zhishu had been lying to him the whole time," he said. "She maintained her facade even in her sleep, saying things like, 'It was mom's fault for not protecting you properly.' He Jiwei told me about it once, but he seemed hesitant. Perhaps even then, he suspected that there was something off about all of this."

"That's right." Wei-erge sighed. "Unfortunately, He Jiwei wasn't a very brave person, was he?"

Xie Qingcheng made no response, so Wei-erge continued. "He didn't have the courage to face his mistakes of the past twenty years until the very last moment, and nearly took these secrets to the grave. But perhaps the heavens really are watching: He Jiwei survived his suicide attempt, ensuring that such evil wouldn't be buried. Who knows what he was thinking, but in the days before his death, he finally summoned He Yu to his bedside and told him everything."

Here, Wei-erge paused for a short while. Then he said, "By comparison, He Yu…was much braver than his father."

Xie Qingcheng felt like he had been stabbed in the heart with a knife.

He recalled that final night he and He Yu spent together at Moyu Alley… He Yu had behaved so strangely back then, clinging to Xie Qingcheng even as he told him that this might very well be their last time

together. He'd thought that He Yu had decided to take on the responsibility of leading the He family moving forward. He had no idea that in reality…

In reality, He Yu had already learned the real truth from He Jiwei. That night, He Yu had been nearly mad with pain, had nearly been driven to death by that truth. But despite being a mere boy suffering from a rare psychological disease, he could only bear it all alone in silence.

He Yu didn't say "one last time" because he chose his family over Xie Qingcheng, but because he knew everything by then. He knew that to uncover the truth he'd have to swim through boiling seas and plunge into raging fires. He wanted to love Xie Qingcheng forever, but he had no choice…

Xie Qingcheng drew a deep breath, the image of He Yu's sorrowful yet calm face that night flashing before his eyes no matter how hard he tried to banish it from his mind. He already knew what had happened next. He had already guessed that…

But still, he picked up the stack of paper and slowly read the last words that He Yu had left to this world. He read them, character by character, carving each stroke into his heart, until he reached the end.

It was all as he expected.

He Yu had done all of this to avenge his mother, and to avenge Zhou Muying and Xie Ping; to determine the full scope of Lü Zhishu's criminal activities and find irrefutable evidence of her wrongdoing. He'd even planned the goods exchange out at sea: Hidden among the cargo to be handed off was a specially designed tracker with recording capabilities. With the impending threat of the Coast Guard's arrival, it was unlikely that the crew sent from Mandela Island would carefully inspect what they had been given. They would bring the tracker back to Duan Wen's lair, and He Yu would have been able to gather even more information.

"Duan Wen's lair is extremely difficult to find," Wei-erge explained. "The island is protected by stealth technology; we've tried to find it on multiple occasions to no avail. We've gone without any breakthroughs for so long, but now…" Wei-erge trailed off. "We've already received the island's GPS coordinates through He Yu's radio frequency. He Yu has done what none of us could do."

Xie Qingcheng remained silent. He didn’t say that He Yu had done a good job—didn’t ask why He Yu had refused to tell them what he learned earlier. He understood the circumstances discussed in the letter.

He also understood the things that had gone unwritten.

Xie Qingcheng knew that Duan Wen’s organization was searching for the First Emperor, and that He Yu didn’t want Xie Qingcheng to risk getting involved. He wanted to dig the organization out from the depths and destroy it, as quickly as possible and for good, so that no one would ever inquire after the First Emperor ever again… He wanted to protect Xie Qingcheng.

The little devil who had only just turned twenty had known the whole truth, and wanted to protect him so badly…

There was only one page of the letter left. After trying to flip it several times, though, Xie Qingcheng found that he couldn’t. *Were the last two sheets of paper stuck together?* he thought. Until, with a sigh, Wei-erge walked over to help him turn to the last page. Staring numbly at his hands, Xie Qingcheng realized that they were shaking violently.

The last page contained only a brief statement consisting of a few short sentences.

That familiar script wrote:

If all goes well with the delivery, and I am able to return safely, then this letter will be unnecessary. Once you have caught Wei Rong and start interrogating me, I will do all that I can to tell you all the truth in person. But I know that I walk a treacherous path, and that it is all too easy to make a mistake. I may never clear my name, or I may lose my life at sea. If that happens…

Xie Qingcheng could no longer feel any vestige of heat in his body, could no longer feel the warm blood of the living flowing through his veins.

He read the final paragraph.

If that happens, please do not give this letter to Xie Qingcheng. If I really do end up dying, I don’t need my name to be cleared, nor do I need my case to be overturned. Please close my case by charging me with the crime of joining forces with Duan Wen. If my death has become an irreversible fact, I do not wish for the person who treated me best in this

world to grieve for me. I would rather he be disappointed in me—rather he spit on my grave—than feel sad and blame himself.

That is my only request.

He Yu

Written on the night of August 19, 2022

No one made a sound. A terrible stillness settled over the room.

Finally, Wei-erge broke the silence. “I wanted to fulfill his final request, but it’s simply not possible. This case has been reported directly to our superior, and all the details will soon be made public. No one will be able to keep the truth under wraps. Furthermore, I think…you ought to know. If the only person in the world who treated him well were to be disappointed in him and view him as a criminal, then it would be as if the life he lived had truly never existed. No one would remember him; no one would care about him.”

Xie Qingcheng slowly set the letter down.

He didn’t listen to the rest of what Wei-erge said. None of it seemed to matter anymore…none of it.

He was only struck with one clear realization: He Yu didn’t have to die. If not for the police’s untimely arrival, He Yu wouldn’t have died. And the police wouldn’t have caught up so easily…if he hadn’t volunteered his active cooperation and stood against He Yu.

He was the one who drove the knife into He Yu’s chest, the one who failed to stop Director Hu in time, who didn’t give He Yu a fighting chance.

He suddenly recalled his last phone call with He Yu. What he said was:

Where are you? Are you stupid?!

He Yu…

Where are you?

Are you stupid…?!

Xie Qingcheng squeezed his eyes shut—He Yu said that he was the person who treated him best in this world. And yet, those were the final

words he said to him. He smoothed his trembling fingers over those words on the page, as if He Yu's hand had only just written them.

But the paper was ice-cold to the touch.

In that moment, the gentle paper talisman that had kept that tattered teddy bear going all these years…finally lost the last of its magic in the biting, salty-sweet ocean breeze. It must have been exhausted from pouring all of its strength into stemming Xie Qingcheng's bleeding and treating Xie Qingcheng's wounds, time after time, for so long. In the end, it had become completely soaked in scarlet.

It no longer had the strength to keep going.

The flame shivered as the lamp ran out of oil. He had loved him till the end.

As He Yu's life flickered out…that talisman that once clung so tightly to the teddy bear's heart finally peeled away and floated to the ground.

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Chapter 190:
Blinded

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, the news struck Huzhou like an earthquake with a thousand epicenters as people began to talk.

Arrest, interrogation, clarification, retrial, public announcement… The mouths of public officials opened and closed, while the mouths of suspects dithered and dawdled.

Meanwhile, even while the public were busy eating their customary three meals a day, nothing could stop them from taking the time to chew over the inside story of the case.

Duan Wen had sacrificed Lü Zhishu like a chess piece. She knew that all too well, but like Jiang Liping, she had a device attached to her that ensured she would not leak any of the organization's secrets. And unlike Jiang Liping's, hers was a far more advanced model: not worn as a bracelet, but rather embedded directly into her wrist during her surgery. Aside from information Duan Wen himself might relinquish, she couldn't reveal any of the organization's core secrets.

In reality, though, there was little value to her confession. The evidence and written testimony that He Yu left behind were far more useful than anything she could give them. And that wasn't even accounting for the tracker he had planted—not only did it provide the police with the exact location of Duan Wen's lair, Mandela Island, but also gave them recordings of several extremely valuable conversations between Duan Wen's subordinates.

The police were more interested in hearing Lü Zhishu admit in her own words how she killed Vivian and stole her identity. They also wanted her to confess the murders she had committed over the course of the past twenty years.

All the major media outlets scrambled to reach for their various connections in the hope of snagging an interview with Lü Zhishu, who had been taken into custody.

“A KILLER AFFAIR: His Partner of Twenty Years Was His Wife’s Murderer!”

“20 Years of Deception:

He Jiwei, His Wife’s Murderer,

AND THEIR SON…”

“Sci-Fi Plastic Surgery?! The TRUTH BEHIND the Insane Machinations of a Mysterious Organization!”

The journalists drafted hundreds of headlines, but none of them won the opportunity to meet Lü Zhishu face-to-face. Aside from the relevant public officials, the only person allowed to see Lü Zhishu was He Li.

In a matter of days, He Li had gone from being the wealthy young scion of a pharmaceutical company to the son of a notorious criminal suspect. Lacking He Yu’s mental fortitude, he broke down in less than two weeks.

The day he went to see Lü Zhishu, he was escorted by patrol cars. The police had done their best to reduce his contact with outsiders, but when he got out of the car at the detention center, he was nevertheless caught by members of official and personal media lying in wait for him. Beneath the wildly flashing lights, he was like a terrified gopher dug up from its burrow. He tried to climb back into his car, but in less than half an hour, the picture of his panicked face went viral on all of the major social media platforms. The entire internet boiled over in a frenzy over it.

But not a single media outlet had any idea what went on during He Li and Lü Zhishu’s actual meeting.

Some of the rumors said that He Li kept shouting at Lü Zhishu, “I’m innocent! What do you expect me to do now?!” Others said that throughout their entire conversation, he didn’t refer to her as “mother” once…

The day after their meeting, led by Zheng Jingfeng, Zhou Muying and Xie Ping’s comrades from twenty years ago headed to the detention center to record statements attesting to the fact that Officers Zhou and Xie had indeed been killed by Lü Zhishu. Additionally, they stated that she had also killed Chen Lisheng as a preventative measure.

When these testimonies were released to the public, the media stopped referring to the defendant as Lü Zhishu, switching to using the usurper's real name: Wei Rong.

When the elderly patriarch of the Wei family learned that this woman was the Wei Rong of years past, the sheer humiliation he felt was far greater than any shock. To prove that the Wei family had nothing to do with this woman and that they were completely unaware of her actions, they gave the police their full cooperation. In their eyes, "Wei Rong" had been dead for years, and this insane woman who wouldn't hesitate to hurt the reputation of Wei Dongheng, her nephew by blood, absolutely could not be considered a member of the Wei family.

As for Wei Rong's parents, they had long since passed away from grief in the wake of their daughter's "death." Everyone said that she didn't even care about her parents, a sure sign that she had completely lost her sense of humanity and cared only for herself.

Ironically, despite being spoiled by her for many years, her son He Li never asked about his mother again after his visit, his callousness an echo of his mother's own ruthlessness years before.

The day after Xie Ping and Zhou Muying's cenotaphs were moved to the Cemetery of Heroes, the police gave special permission to the victims' surviving son, allowing him to meet with Wei Rong.

It had been exactly twenty years since the two officers were killed.

The visitation room was dimly lit, the only light source an incandescent lamp above Wei Rong's head. It shone down on her face, revealing a borderline unhinged expression. The mental blows of the past ten days had caused her to lose an alarming amount of weight, and her skin sagged from her body. She resembled a malevolent demon wearing a painted skin.

"She's practically lost her mind, so her responses tend to be rather extreme," Zheng Jingfeng warned Xie Qingcheng before letting him in.

Xie Qingcheng could already see signs of her madness through the blast-resistant glass. "I understand."

The door swung open.

Wei Rong snapped out of her daze to stare at Xie Qingcheng, studying him blankly for nearly a minute before throwing her head back with a braying laugh. “Professor Xie…? Ha ha ha ha… I almost didn’t recognize you… Seeing you like this now…I feel so much better… Ah ha…ha ha ha ha…”

“You’ve changed a lot as well, Executive Wei.”

She didn’t expect him to be so composed. Her vicious smile faded as she gritted her teeth. “You… How can you act so calmly talking to me like this?” she demanded.

“I simply can,” he said.

After a few seconds of silence, she narrowed her eyes in a venomous glare that threatened to peel off a layer of Xie Qingcheng’s flesh and blood. “This is absurd! That son of a bitch went to such lengths…for someone like you? That self-destructive little pervert…outmaneuvered me? It’s beyond absurd! A complete farce! What’s so great about someone like you? A heartless, decrepit old man—you’re nothing more than damaged goods… Damaged goods! As expected of the son of a fucking pleb; of course he’d fall for someone of the same inferior breeding!”

The police officer standing next to Xie Qingcheng snapped, “Wei Rong!”

“Fuck off!” Wei Rong spat at the officer. If it hadn’t been for the restraints confining her to the interrogation chair a good distance away from him, her spittle really would have landed. “Who do you think you are? As if you’re worthy of speaking to me!”

The officer took several furious strides forward, but from the doorway Zheng Jingfeng shook his head: a silent order to stop engaging in unnecessary chitchat with the crazed woman.

Xie Qingcheng showed no signs of anger. Since he’d entered the room, the only impression he gave off was an intense chill. It wasn’t the kind of biting frigidity that one might exert to pressure others, but the complete absence of warmth, as if his heart had gone cold.

He lowered his lashes and fixed his unblinking stare on Lü Zhishu.

“You’ve already become like this…and you’re still staring at me like that… You’re crazy, Xie Qingcheng… You’re truly crazy!”

Slowly, he sat down before the interrogation chair, his pale face as cold and expressionless as a corpse lying in a casket. Ignoring her crass ranting, he parted his chapped lips and said, “Wei Rong, in all your life, you have done only one good thing.”

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Silence.

“You neglected him, thus allowing him to become the complete opposite of your son.”

Lü Zhishu stared at him, face twitching. She knew that the outwardly brittle yet coolly collected man before her was openly condemning her, and after a few seconds of stunned silence, she lashed back with even greater malice. “That’s right! I neglected him, and so he grew up into a complete idiot! If I had raised him properly, he would’ve known the difference between things that are worth treasuring and useless trash! He would never have destroyed his family and gotten himself blown up for a worthless person like you! Does that make you happy, Xie Qingcheng? You’ve accomplished what that nosy mother of yours couldn’t! Granted, you only managed to do it by spreading your legs and getting fucked by another man! You son of a bitch! You trampy little whore! What are you so proud of? How dare you come and strut around in front of me!”

Her cursing was so vulgar, even Zheng Jingfeng couldn’t bear it. To think that this woman was a blue-blooded aristocrat… He suddenly remembered Jiang Liping. She had once been an unsophisticated young girl from a humble mountain village, but compared to Wei Rong, she had been much more dignified in the face of certain death. Humans might have their social rankings, but real dignity and nobility were measured not by money nor social status, but by one’s heart.

He turned to Xie Qingcheng. “Maybe you should forget it and just go home. In your current state—”

“I’m fine.” Xie Qingcheng gazed at the woman in the interrogation chair. “Wei Rong,” he said in a flat, bone-chilling voice. “It was your own decisions that brought you to where you are now. You loved He Jiwei, so you deliberately tampered with the airtight equipment in his laboratory, hoping that by doing so, you could cause Vivian to lose her child. However, Vivian endured the aftermath of your sabotage and discovered signs of your guilt. Fearing criminal charges, you killed the police officers who helped her investigate the truth. These are the first two murders on your hands.”

Sitting in his chair with his hands clasped before him, his sickly pale face cast in shadow, Xie Qingcheng mechanically recounted Wei Rong’s past. He spoke on behalf of the dead, allowing the souls of the deceased to

use his flesh and blood to demand justice from their killer—twenty years too late.

"You didn't want to live the rest of your life with an arrest for murder hanging over you like a shadow, so like a cicada shedding its skin, you killed Vivian and stole the identity of the woman you envied and loathed. This is the third murder on your hands.

"You wanted He Jiwei to believe that you were the real Lü Zhishu, thus you kept up the charade and stole away another woman's child. You despised that child, but for the sake of your own goals, you forced him to recognize his enemy as kin. You called yourself his mother, yet never offered him any trace of maternal warmth. He was your fourth victim.

"You wanted more, and so you had your own child with He Jiwei. He Yu was no longer of any use to you, so you treated him worse than a dog—that is, until he became useful to Duan Wen. Then you began to feign civility, only to hurt your own son's feelings… You destroyed your own son—this is the fifth life you've ruined.

"You killed Chen Lisheng for investigating the truth of what happened. That is the sixth death on your hands.

"Finally, He Jiwei committed suicide when he learned the whole truth. Out of your twisted love, you lied to him for twenty years. With his death, that makes seven lives that were sacrificed due to your actions. Seven. Seven people, and that's not even accounting for the people who died from the drugs you trafficked. Wei Rong, your irredeemable actions serve only your own selfish desires. Now, your end has come, and you have only yourself to blame."

"…Absurd! *Absurd!* That's complete bullshit! When have I ever hurt my son?! I never hurt my husband either!" Wei Rong shrieked hysterically, her expression twisting with malevolence. "I love them… I love him… *You're* the ones who destroyed my family! If it wasn't for your instigation, nothing would have happened! Nothing!"

The more she spoke, the crazier she became.

"I only have myself to blame? What right do you have to say that I only have myself to blame? What right do you have to say that I destroyed seven lives? Xie Qingcheng, do you have the right to say that to me? You

don’t! Let me tell *you*, He Yu died because of you. You used him! You drove him to his death! You’re just as cruel as me!”

She truly loathed Xie Qingcheng—this was all because of him!

Years ago, she very nearly met her downfall at Zhou Muying’s hands. She’d managed to escape then—only for the woman’s son to catch her twenty torturous years later…

The more Wei Rong thought about it, the more hateful she became. “You have no right to mock me,” she said, flashing a menacing smile. “Look at you. Retribution’s come down on you as well, hasn’t it? That’s right… I used unscrupulous methods to achieve my goals, but I could only be taken down by someone like me, someone who’s willing to put everything on the line. You and I are exactly the same, Xie Qingcheng. Do you really think you treated He Yu well? You were just using his feelings to avenge your parents!”

She glared balefully at him. “And now, you’ve achieved your goal as well. I really ought to congratulate you. You came to see what’s become of me on behalf of your parents, didn’t you? You’re here to hit me while I’m down and mock me, aren’t you?!”

Xie Qingcheng stared at her in silence for several long minutes.

He had spent the past two decades desperately searching for an answer. Now, the answer was right here in front of him. The person who killed his parents and Chen Lisheng…who had even hired a hitman to run him over, ultimately causing him to become afflicted with psychological Ebola, was the woman sitting across the table.

He had been alone with her on countless occasions over the years, but had never had any idea that she was the murderer, her hands covered in so much blood.

“That’s right,” he said slowly, one word at a time. “Of all the people you plotted against twenty years ago,, I am the only survivor. Although you disgust me, I must come to personally witness your end.”

“I disgust you…? What right have you to call me disgusting?! You worthless boytoy…”

“Wei Rong! That’s enough!” Zheng Jingfeng cut in.

“What? Did I say something wrong? He *is* a worthless boytoy!” Wei Rong bared her teeth at Zheng Jingfeng before turning back to Xie Qingcheng. “You know perfectly well the shameless things you did with that son of a bitch, don’t you? If only I’d splashed all of your disgusting photos all over the newspapers’ front page! You fucking slut! People like you will do anything for money. Only a lovesick idiot like that bitch’s whelp would sacrifice so much for your sake…”

“Wei Rong!” Zheng Jingfeng barked in a thunderous voice.

“Let her continue,” Xie Qingcheng said.

Silence.

“Go on,” said Xie Qingcheng. “What did He Yu sacrifice for my sake?”

Zheng Jingfeng looked deeply unhappy, but there was nothing he could do to persuade Xie Qingcheng. The man was like an ice statue—cold, hard, and completely immovable.

Wei Rong’s mouth was steeped in snake venom as she bared her teeth in a ghastly smile and stared at Xie Qingcheng. “Do you really not know, or are you just pretending not to know…? Xie Qingcheng, aren’t you curious how He Yu gained Duan Wen’s confidence so quickly that he would allow him to work for the organization? Hm?”

She studied his expression…watched his face stay completely absent of emotion.

“Duan Wen is not the type to be so careless,” she began, an eerie note to her voice. “Even if He Yu is my son, and possesses the blood toxin, Duan Wen would still be suspicious of his decision. There’s no way he would trust him so easily, especially when He Yu was once one of his enemies! That is, unless…he made a sacrifice great enough to win Duan Wen’s trust; great enough that Duan Wen could be 100 percent certain this person would not—and could not—betray him!”

Xie Qingcheng remained silent.

It was in that moment that Wei Rong opened her mouth and sank her fangs into the flesh of her prey, injecting her venom into his bloodstream. “That’s right!” she declared with a wild cackle. “None of you knew that the

reason Duan Wen trusted him was because in order to complete his mission, He Yu willingly accepted his monitoring chip!”

A stunned silence descended on the room.

Wei Rong had made no mention of this before; even Zheng Jingfeng was shocked.

“You had no idea, did you? You had no idea! Ha ha…ha ha ha ha! He was the same as me! The same as Jiang Liping! While pretending to cooperate with Duan Wen, he accepted the same implant we all did…! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!

“Whatever evidence and statements he left behind, they were all written beforehand! After he accepted the monitoring chip, he wouldn’t have been able to tell the police anything, not even to defend himself. He knew that he could very well die with the reputation of a criminal, but he still chose to cut off his own path of retreat by taking such a massive risk in exchange for Duan Wen’s complete trust. He did it all for his mother… And for you!”

A flicker of pain finally crossed Xie Qingcheng’s face. Wei Rong seemed to delight in this, her eyes gleaming brighter with each word spoken as her mouth slid even wider in a terrifying grin.

“Xie Qingcheng… I witnessed that surgery with my own eyes… Jiang Liping wore her monitoring chip as a bracelet, while I had one embedded in my own wrist… However, Duan Wen truly thought highly of He Yu. For He Yu, he used the most advanced monitoring chip, and the most difficult to fool. In all these years, only one such chip has ever been made: The one implanted in He Yu’s heart!

“He had the procedure right before he shipped out… Ha ha ha… It’s hilarious, isn’t it?! Xie Qingcheng? You must have wondered why he didn’t tell you more of the truth. Well, it’s because he couldn’t! He couldn’t do it, Xie Qingcheng.” Wei Rong’s eyes were feverishly bright, her expression wild. She knew that she had finally plunged her knife deep into Xie Qingcheng’s heart.

“In fact, everything that he did after that risked the possibility that the monitoring chip would sentence him to death. The only thing that could prove his innocence was the letter he wrote, which might never be found,

and the only person he could place his hopes in was you! Perhaps, as he lay on the operating table, he still naively believed that you would trust him unconditionally, just as he trusted you."

Wei Rong's every word bore into Xie Qingcheng's heart.

"But you betrayed him. For your sense of justice, you killed the person who debased himself for your sake and loved you so deeply, the person who risked his life for you! You betrayed him. You killed him! His death is not mine to claim, but yours! You're the one who destroyed him in the end! It was you!"

She laughed like a lunatic, but her voice was fierce and powerful. "I know that my life is going to end in the death penalty. You've won, Xie Qingcheng, but remember this: You will live the rest of your life steeped in this pain. You and I walk the same path; you may very well be even more heartless than me. He was wrong to trust you. When I reach hell…I want to see just how disgusted he is with you, and have a good laugh. Then, I'll come visit you in your dreams, tell you everything about how much he hates you! You destroyed my life… You and your busybody parents destroyed my life!"

Her bloodshot eyes were filled with bitter tears as they bulged from her head, and her crazed laughter rang out with glee and hate in equal measure. Her expression was terrifying as she spat out the last of her frightful words: "I won't let you get off scot-free even if I die."

Xie Qingcheng's ears were ringing. He was deaf to the world around him.

After the visit ended, he stepped out of the interrogation room with Zheng Jingfeng. Despite being his elder, Zheng Jingfeng regarded him nervously, not daring to speak too casually with him as he stood quietly to the side.

It was a long while before he finally broke the silence. "She might have been lying, so don't overthink it," he said. "The way I see it, she was obviously trying to provoke you. You never know when you're dealing with someone so vicious—"

But Xie Qingcheng cut him off before he could finish. "Zheng Jingfeng, do you think that I have a heart of stone?"

Zheng Jingfeng looked terribly sad. “Don’t listen to her nonsense.” He turned to gaze at Xie Qingcheng. “How could you turn out like this in a matter of days if you truly had a heart of stone?”

The reason Lü Zhishu had burst into laughter the moment she saw him? Xie Qingcheng’s forehead was wrapped in snowy white bandages, slanted down to cover one of his eyes. A few loose strands of hair fell over his brow.

He had gone blind in one eye.

The day he was notified of He Yu’s death, Xie Qingcheng didn’t lose his mind or break down. In fact, he didn’t even cry.

He had kept his emotions firmly under control for twenty years. There was nothing that could cause him to lose his sense of clarity and reason. That evening, he went through his usual routine, then lay calmly down in bed. There was no sleeplessness that lasted the entire night, no weeping till dawn.

He was so calm he seemed like an empty shell, a pale corpse. He slept, and did not dream of an amusement park with a teddy bear and a smiling boy who walked toward him.

He slept the whole night uninterrupted by dreams or light. When he closed his eyes, all he saw was darkness. He endured each passing second, which seemed to span a year, his head pounding.

When he opened his eyes the next morning, he found that his vision, already steadily deteriorating, had become blurrier than ever. He sat woodenly in bed for a long time, until he gathered the strength to get up and face a world that, at first glance, seemed exactly the same as yesterday—but in reality had changed completely due to the simple absence of one person.

He slowly pushed himself upright and made his way to the bathroom mirror.

It was then that he saw the line of crimson beneath his left eye. The trail of bloody tears had already dried.

When did he shed them? He had no idea. When did they run dry? He had no idea of that either.

Why had he shed them?

Only he knew the answer to that question, but it no longer mattered.

Xie Qingcheng lifted his hand and waved it gently before his left eye. A few seconds later, he lowered it.

It was dark.

The lights of the amusement park had gone out. With that person gone, even his dreams lost all color.

And his eye, which had quietly shed a final trail of bloody tears in the night, seemed to be blind for good.

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Chapter 191:
Do You Think I Will Hate You?

XIE QINGCHENG HAD LOST his sight in one eye.

After he'd finished his cooperation with the police in all matters of the case that concerned him, he made an appointment at Meiyu to get his left eye checked.

The hospital director personally conducted the examination. He informed Xie Qingcheng that due to a combination of his existing poor health, an excess of tears, and the mental blows he'd recently experienced, he had suffered what appeared to be irreversible damage to his left optic nerve.

After listening calmly to the director's explanation, Xie Qingcheng told him that he hadn't shed any tears at all.

The director paused, taking in the bloodless color of his lips and his sightless left eye. "Not all tears brim over," he said, "but that doesn't mean that they don't exist. Nor does it mean that they have run dry."

"That sounds highly unlikely."

"You're the only one who can say whether what I just said is true."

Xie Qingcheng didn't bother disputing it. He no longer cared to argue with anyone about anything. He went home by himself without another word, like a stubborn old man.

Xie Xue, Wei Dongheng, Auntie Li, and Captain Zheng were all worried about him, and they visited and tried to comfort him. But Xie Qingcheng was perfectly composed, as if he hadn't just lost sight in one eye at all.

He remembered that He Yu had once said his eyes were beautiful. Maybe He Yu hated him so much that when he died, he'd taken one of them with him, the way one might pluck a bloodred rose.

Perhaps it's not so bad after all, if he likes them so much, Xie Qingcheng thought, closing his eyes in exhaustion. He tired much easier

these days, as if something within him that had been pulled taut for twenty years had finally gone slack.

He had finally found the answer he had been seeking. Wei Rong had been taken into custody. A sentencing hearing had been scheduled, and just as expected, she was given the death penalty. The material He Yu had provided identified the dirty cop in the municipal bureau who was responsible for protecting the likes of Wei Rong and Huang Zhilong. Along with the evidence secretly gathered by Captain Zheng, they had all the proof needed to take that great protective umbrella into custody for internal disciplinary review. And from the last of He Yu's information, the Ministry of Public Security was able to determine the exact location of Mandela Island and intercept a wealth of useful information. At this very moment, they were preparing for a raid on Duan Wen's lair.

The heroic deeds of the officers who had died in the line of duty were proven, and their headstones had already been moved to the Cemetery of Heroes. It seemed like all the wrongs of the past had been righted, that former darkness giving way to light.

So why did he feel so tired…?

He had been relieved of a heavy burden, only to lose sight of any purpose. It was as if he'd been afflicted by snow blindness, his mind a blank expanse of white. His only reason for living was organizing the works of Qin Ciyan. Everything else was being handled by other people. Xie Qingcheng had neither the authority nor the energy to deal with any of it.

He sat by the window, his body racked with coughs. On the sill sat the little Charmander figurine with the glued-on tail. He touched its flaming tail with his ice-cold hand. The resin figurine was cool to the touch. The little Charmander that could provide him with just a bit of warmth was long gone.

Xie Qingcheng went to the He family villa by himself a few days later and stood for a long time before the sealed iron gates, staring beyond them. Autumn had arrived. The summer hydrangeas were on their last breath and, without anyone tending to it, the expansive front lawn where he and He Yu had first met was growing unkempt.

"Doctor Xie."

Faintly, Xie Qingcheng heard someone calling out to him, but when he turned to look, there was no one there.

Next, he went to the track field at He Yu's school. During summer break there weren't very many people on campus, so he was the only person sitting in the stands of the giant stadium. He remembered the way He Yu had smiled so brightly after winning the thousand meter sprint, not long before they broke up.

He'd truly looked like a twenty-year-old boy back then, his figure as he chased the wind beneath the sun the picture of flourishing youth.

"Xie Qingcheng, if you come to my race, I'll definitely win first place."

His voice rang out again, clearer now than at the villa. Xie Qingcheng glanced around, but there was no one there. When he turned back to the running track, though, for a moment he could almost see He Yu racing around the field.

He had poured his all into that race, as if doing so could obtain for him the companionship, the dream, that he so desired.

One lap…two laps…

He Yu sprinted as fast as he could. The most precious thing about young people was that they possessed the determination to not give up until the very end. Xie Qingcheng stared at the empty track field, wanting He Yu to stop running stupidly ahead like this, to stop being so persistent…

There's no more road ahead, He Yu.

There's only sea. Don't go…

Don't go.

He sat there in a daze for who could say how long, until a janitor came over to inform him that the stadium was closing for the day, and that campus was not open to outsiders at night. It was only then that Xie Qingcheng realized the sky had gone dark.

He hailed a taxi, intending to go home, but when the driver asked him where to, he slowly gave the name of a certain jazz bar on the Bund.

Xie Qingcheng had never gone to a bar by himself before.

Back in that little tavern that felt transported from Europe over a hundred years ago, he took a seat at the table where he and He Yu had once sat. The jazz band performed the same songs that they played every day, and Xie Qingcheng listened, reliving the most relaxing day of his life.

“Do you know, I love you, I hate you?” crooned the old man on stage.

Cast in flickering candlelight in the reflection in his wine glass, Xie Qingcheng smiled as he listened.

It was strange, to think that he could still smile. He rested his chin in the palm of his hand, his eyes filled with amber light. It was strange, that he had only one seeing eye which grew blinder by the day, yet he could clearly see a young boy walking in from outside.

It was a thirteen-year-old He Yu. Holding a fake ID, he bluffed his way past the serving staff with his height and imperious aura and calmly took a seat at the bar. He watched with bright eyes as the jazz band on stage performed that familiar old song, beaming and clapping politely when it ended.

I saw you.

Do you know…?

I heard you.

Do you know?

As the night deepened, Xie Qingcheng finished the last of his wine and looked up to see He Yu as he’d been on his birthday. He wore formal clothes, and he smiled as he offered a hand to Xie Qingcheng.

Sir, may I have this dance?

Xie Qingcheng stared at him for a very, very long time, the rims of his eyes flushed red with wine. Softly, he said, “I’m sorry for hurting you…”

I’m sorry…

In the end, it was I who got you killed.

Did you know?

If you knew what would happen, would you have still asked me to dance that day?

I'm sorry…He Yu…

I'm sorry…

His voice was choked with emotion, but with his head spinning and his ears ringing, even he couldn't hear the broken syllables he uttered. He briefly lowered his blurry, damp eyes, then looked up again; he wanted to see He Yu's gently smiling face one more time.

But everything had gone dark. There was nothing before him but a vast expanse of pitch-black.

A single summer hydrangea fluttered down, disintegrating as it landed on the ground like the shattered remains of the beautiful dream to which he could never return.

When Xie Qingcheng awoke, he found himself lying in the intensive care unit of Meiyu Private Hospital. Gradually, he realized that he must have fainted in the jazz bar and been taken to the hospital by some overzealous bystanders. In his state, no other hospital would have been able to take him in as a patient, so in the end he was sent back to Meiyu.

Xie Xue was curled up by his bedside fast asleep, her eyes swollen like walnuts from all the crying she'd done.

She was already beginning to show, and she should have been resting while she was pregnant. But she couldn't do it. So much information had come out in the media recently, and what hadn't been in the news she'd learned from the Wei family and the police.

All the things she'd never been able to understand had suddenly become crystal clear.

She was unspeakably distressed for Xie Qingcheng, but there was nothing she could do besides stay by her older brother's side and hope that through her, he might still feel the warmth of the living. She held his hands night after night after his admission to the hospital. His fingers were ice-cold, like those of a corpse.

Worried for her health, Wei Dongheng had tried persuading her to switch places with him so that she could get some sleep, but she'd burst into

tears.

Clutching at Xie Qingcheng's hands, she gazed helplessly at her husband and sobbed, "Why aren't his hands warming up? I've been holding them for so long—why won't they warm up?"

Xie Qingcheng possessed a unique constitution. He moved through this world in a sickly body, and each round of treatment he underwent at Meiyu brought with it an agony that was a thousand times more painful than chemotherapy. Previously, he had been hanging on by sheer force of will, but now, that will seemed to have withered away.

His blood ran cold, like the blood of the person who had died for him.

"Ge…" Xie Xue hugged him tightly, pressing her forehead to his shoulder, her face streaked with tears. Wei Dongheng couldn't convince her to let go of her brother, so she cried herself asleep at Xie Qingcheng's bedside.

When Xie Qingcheng woke up, his throat was so parched that he couldn't make a sound. He gazed at Xie Xue's sleeping face for a while, gently touching her hair.

She woke up in an instant. "Ge?!"

There was no one else in the room. Xie Qingcheng took a moment to catch his breath. "Why are you sleeping here?" he asked. "Where is Wei Dongheng?"

"He went to buy breakfast." Xie Xue rubbed her eyes, then grabbed his hand. "Ge, how are you feeling? Do you feel a little better? Let me go fetch the doctor…" The words spilled from her mouth like handfuls of dry beans.

Xie Qingcheng watched her for a moment, then said simply, "You must know a lot of things by now." It was a statement, not a question.

She fell silent, lowering her eyes and nodding. Maybe she had been tamping down her emotions for too long, because she suddenly threw herself into Xie Qingcheng's arms and began to cry. "Ge…does it hurt? You're hurting terribly, aren't you?"

"…I'm fine."

“You’re lying…” Xie Xue broke into more hysterical sobs. “You’re lying! I know you’re heartbroken about He Yu. I’m…I’m sad too… But you can’t go on like this… You can’t go on like this, Ge!” Great big tears slid down her face as she wept. “I know that you’re hurting because he’s gone… You can’t even see anymore… But…but I’m begging you, don’t do this anymore… Don’t lie to us and say that you’re fine! Don’t keep us in the dark and say that everything’s okay… I know that your body’s breaking down and your organs are failing! I know about all of it!”

Xie Qingcheng stared at her, stunned silent. Gradually, the light in his lone seeing eye faded.

“The director told you?”

She nodded, mopping at her tears.

He was quiet for a long time. Despite the pain, in the end he smiled slightly, and said, “What does it matter?” Indeed, compared to He Yu, who had lived out his whole life with nothing at all, he already had plenty. To him, the pain he felt wasn’t even worth mentioning.

Xie Xue stared at her brother in disbelief, as if he had gone mad. “What does it matter?” she repeated, her voice shaking. “How can it not matter?! Ge… All these years, how much did it hurt…?”

All these years, how much pain had he suffered?

He had pieced together his broken body and come back from oblivion.

He had borne the pain of his parents’ murder alone, all while keeping his little sister’s eyes covered so she’d never have to learn the truth about the crimes that had transpired. Her carefree childhood had only been possible thanks to his protection, letting her grow up happy and healthy while he endured the darkness in solitude.

It was a hard and painful road to walk. His wife had left him, his teacher had passed away…

He endured the pain for over twenty years without breathing a word to anyone.

It wasn’t until yesterday that Xie Xue finally saw Xie Qingcheng’s treatment room, and that was only after the old director had revealed many

other secrets to her and Wei Dongheng. Helpless in the face of her pleading, he led them to that freezing treatment room while Xie Qingcheng was still unconscious: the ice-cold iron, chilly liquid chamber, unyielding restraints, metal hospital bed, and the emergency call bell that was the only way for Xie Qingcheng to communicate with the outside world during his treatment.

The director told them about RN-13, although he never divulged Xie Qingcheng's secret that he was the First Emperor. He explained Xie Qingcheng's condition as a psychological Ebola patient, and the pain that he endured during treatment, in general terms—but that was already enough for Xie Xue to fall to her knees and dissolve into heart-wrenching sobs in the middle of the treatment room.

How painful it must have been… How painful it must have been for him!

"Your brother made this decision after his divorce." The director carefully skirted around the topic of the First Emperor, merely telling Xie Xue that Xie Qingcheng had hoped to find a treatment option that would enhance his mental processing and delay any organ failure.

"It was partly in the hope of developing a cure for Qin Rongbei, and partly because this was the only way he would have the energy to thoroughly analyze and restore the fragmented research notes Qin Ciyan had left behind. Those notes contained extremely valuable medical information, and he knew they had the potential to save countless lives. He had failed to preserve them, and someone else was able to destroy them. He told me he was consumed with guilt following that incident."

Xie Xue finally struggled to her feet with the support of Wei Dongheng's strong hands.

Despite her own sorrow, she bowed toward the hospital director and said, "I'm sorry, Director… I know that my brother couldn't afford such high medical expenses on his salary. You've done so much for him over the years. All that money…we can pay it all now. I'll definitely—"

He waved his hands, hurrying to cut her off. "This hospital was founded by myself and Lao-Qin. When Lao-Qin passed away, the place fell into chaos, and we encountered a number of operational difficulties in regard to cash flow. It was your brother who came to me and donated

hundreds of thousands of his own savings to the hospital. How could I possibly have the face to ask him for money?"

Xie Xue was stunned.

"He… He… S-so when he…" Her face grew paler and paler as she suddenly realized why Xie Qingcheng had given everything he could to Li Ruoqiu in their divorce; why he never spoke ill of her and forbade Xie Xue from mentioning her adultery to outsiders. When he made the donation to Lao-Qin's hospital, they were still married. And a man like Xie Qingcheng would never do something like that without permission from his wife.

"Did he come by himself when he made that donation?" Xie Xue blurted out.

"No." The director shook his head. "He was accompanied by his then wife, Ms. Li. They both signed the certificate of donation…"

Her tears overflowed once more.

For so many years, she'd assumed the reason her brother refused to discuss his wife's unfaithfulness and never named her as the party at fault during their divorce was because he was afraid of losing face. In reality…it was because Xie Qingcheng had never forgotten Li Ruoqiu's support with the hospital donations.

"He probably didn't tell her very much," the director said. "All Ms. Li knew was that he felt guilty because he was the one who passed Yi Beihai's mother's files to Lao-Qin. When he stepped out for a smoke, she even asked me if her husband was particularly close to Lao-Qin, and I told her no. I asked her if she regretted it, and told her that if she didn't want to, she didn't have to make the donation. I remember she thought about it for a long moment, and then she said she would go through with it—it was a good deed, and, after all, they had been husband and wife for so many years…"

The more Xie Xue listened, the more emotional she became. She never could have expected any of this.

By then, Li Ruoqiu had already fallen out of love with Xie Qingcheng. But Xie Qingcheng was always slow when it came to emotions, so he had no idea. As for Li Ruoqiu, Xie Xue had always thought that she was incredibly greedy: Not only had she cheated on and divorced her

husband, she also took the last of their family's money in the settlement. But it turned out that Li Ruoqiu wasn't nearly so bad. She had helped Xie Qingcheng accomplish the one thing he wanted to do most without objection, allowing him to donate all their years of accumulated savings.

She didn't love him anymore, she resented him for being so cold and dispassionate—she even cheated on him. But people were complex, and human nature was like a kaleidoscope. There was no such thing as a good person who never committed any wrongs, or an evil person who had never once done the right thing.

Li Ruoqiu had given Xie Qingcheng all of her support because she already knew that this was the last thing she could do for him as his wife. Later, Xie Qingcheng had surely realized the guilt she must have felt when she signed off on the donation, and the fact that she likely considered it a form of compensation.

As someone who always strove to be the strongest, he must have been utterly humiliated…

No one wanted him anymore. One by one, everyone left him behind, leaving him with unsolved cases, with self-recrimination, with guilt, with a sense of pity.

Now, as Xie Xue clung to Xie Qingcheng, tears rolling down her cheeks, she said, "Ge…how much did it hurt? These past twenty years… how much did it hurt?"

Xie Qingcheng could feel her warmth, but for some strange reason, it no longer flowed into his heart. He patted Xie Xue gently on the back. "I'm fine," he said hoarsely. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

He wasn't lying to her. His heart had died with He Yu. And the dead didn't feel pain.

When Wei Dongheng returned, Xie Qingcheng had just managed to calm Xie Xue down.

Wei Dongheng brought in some food for Xie Xue. Xie Qingcheng couldn't eat food that hadn't been approved by the hospital, so he and Wei Dongheng first coaxed Xie Xue into finishing up her congee, then convinced her to go home and get some proper rest. She wanted to stay with

Xie Qingcheng, but there was no way one pair of fists could outmatch two, especially when two of the hands belonged to her elder brother.

She could only sit by his bedside and slowly eat her congee, eyes swollen and red.

Wei Dongheng glanced at Xie Xue, then turned back to Xie Qingcheng. “Xie-ge, there’s something we want to discuss with you,” he announced.

“Go ahead.”

He stood up, expression solemn. “We…we would like to take you to the United States for treatment. The director told us that the best medical equipment available is in New York, where RN-13 was originally developed, so…whether it’s for Xie Xue’s sake or your unborn nephew’s, I think…”

The rims of Wei Dongheng’s eyes reddened. He wasn’t the most sensitive crayon in the box, and he rarely showed his soft side. But now, despite his trembling voice, he forced the words from his mouth. “We…we want you to live. We want you not to give up on yourself.”

Xie Xue looked up as well. The two of them had discussed this beforehand, but she hadn’t had the chance to bring it up with Xie Qingcheng. She was genuinely afraid that she didn’t have it in her to mention it at all—that her voice would break the moment she opened her mouth.

It turned out just as she had expected: After she swallowed down a mouthful of congee, it took her several tries before she could speak, and her voice came out pleading and choked with emotion. “Ge…let’s figure out a way for you to keep living, okay? If you left like this, it would break my heart. You know how stupid I am. I don’t know how to raise a kid. You have to live… We’ll find a way to treat your condition…and then you can help me. You can teach me how to raise my kid, teach me how to care for him and comfort him… Teach me a bit at a time how to raise him, just like you raised me, okay…?”

Xie Qingcheng remained silent.

His sister wiped her eyes. “Ge… Please, I’m begging you… Mom and Dad’s case is solved now, and Qin-jiejie is gone. All that’s left now is

sorting Qin-yeye's[2] books… But let's do that slowly, okay? I can't live without you…"

I can't live without you.

There was a sudden tremor in Xie Qingcheng's heart.

Someone had once said those same words to him, as they were covered in soot, and hugged him fiercely amid a sea of fire.

"If you give up just like that," Xie Xue began, "He Yu… He would be heartbroken if he found out. Ge, think about He Yu… He's already sacrificed himself for this, so…can you…can you not let him feel sad anymore in the afterlife? Ge…"

Xie Qingcheng slowly closed his eyes.

He knew perfectly well that He Yu wouldn't feel sad over this. Xie Xue had no idea what he'd said to He Yu during their final conversation. She had no clue which stonehearted man was the one who'd laid the final trap for him.

If there really was another life, when He Yu saw him again, he would surely hate him.

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Chapter 192:
To a Distant Land

IN THE END, Xie Qingcheng decided to go to the United States.

Xie Xue's next physical examination revealed that her condition was quite poor. She'd received so many mental blows recently, and the doctors said that she was showing severe symptoms of prenatal stress. If Xie Qingcheng didn't cooperate, her chances would be slim.

Xie Qingcheng hadn't spent a single day living for himself since he was fourteen years old. And though his parents' case was solved now, it seemed his fate hadn't changed at all.

With the Wei family handling the logistics, the paperwork was quickly approved. Shortly after he was discharged from the hospital, Xie Qingcheng would be leaving the country for treatment. The week before his departure, Chen Man asked to meet with him.

Chen Man had suffered heavy injuries in the naval battle, and he'd been hospitalized for over a month while he recovered. He originally asked to meet Xie Qingcheng at the vegetarian restaurant they went to before, but a few minutes after reading the message, Xie Qingcheng wrote back requesting that they change locations. They agreed to meet at a Zen Buddhist teahouse instead.

Chen Man arrived first, and he waited at a table for a while before Xie Qingcheng joined him. He had prepared himself mentally beforehand, but the sight of his old friend still left Chen Man reeling with shock and distress.

"Ge…"

In one short month, Xie Qingcheng seemed to have aged more than ten years.

Once he'd given off a sharp and cold aura, his every gesture exuding a fierce chill. There was still a wintry cast to his face, but the severity that underpinned his every expression had faded now. He looked as sickly and

exhausted as a withered tree, and his complexion was unnaturally pale, like a ghost forced to remain in this mortal world.

Although their age difference had always been noticeable when they stood side by side, it was never glaringly obvious. Now, though, it was unmistakable.

Xie Qingcheng sat down across the table. Chen Man stared at him for a long time, the rims of his eyes turning red, then looked away. Only once he was sure he'd forced back his tears did he turn to face him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," said Xie Qingcheng.

"I didn't wait that long…"

"Have your injuries healed?"

"Mm."

"That's good."

The conversation was unusually stilted, as if an invisible film divided the space between them.

But Chen Man couldn't resist breaking through the barrier in the end, raising a topic that was taboo to both of them. "Ge…I'm sorry. I-if I knew that he wasn't really Duan Wen's henchman, I would never have…"

"You didn't kill him. Your teammates didn't do it either. It wasn't you. You were only there to do your job." Xie Qingcheng leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, gazing at Chen Man despite the fact that one of his eyes could no longer see anything at all. "I was the one who killed him."

"That's not true, Ge," Chen Man protested. "You mustn't think that…"

Xie Qingcheng lowered his lashes, as if reluctant to continue on about this topic. A hot cup of tea sat between them, tendrils of steam rising silently from its surface.

Chen Man wiped his tears. "Ge, your eye…"

But Xie Qingcheng didn't care about his eye. "You were the last person to see him," he said abruptly.

"…Mm."

A few seconds of silence.

Then: “What was he like…in the end? Can you tell me?”

There was no response from Chen Man. After a moment, a teardrop landed on the table.

In the end, He Yu stood on that ship and threw his head back with wild laughter, his expression twisted with madness and heartbreak. Anyone could have seen his despair in that moment. He even asked Chen Man to shoot him dead himself. When he saw Chen Man there, he had relinquished what remained of his desire to live in the belief that Xie Qingcheng’s unflinching decisiveness came from his desire to protect Chen Man.

In the end, He Yu’s eyes had been filled with hatred and sorrow.

But how could Chen Man say that to Xie Qingcheng? Xie Qingcheng had already gone blind in one eye; he’d already been reduced to a mere husk. How could Chen Man possibly stab another knife into his heart?

Sometimes, silence was the best answer.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes.

“Ge…you’re…in love with him, aren’t you?” Chen Man asked sadly.

Silence.

“I used to think that you were being forced, or that you just had to be with him for some other reason, but now…” Chen Man trailed off, tears sliding down his cheeks one after another.

Xie Qingcheng didn’t say that he loved him. But he didn’t say that he didn’t, either.

What was love…?

Was love something that could be felt by someone like him, who couldn’t give He Yu 100 percent of his trust?

He had once been a witness to the sight of true love. Immersed in that pure love, he had stared into the world’s most passionate eyes, heard the most honest declaration of devotion, and been carefully guarded in a way unlike anything he’d known before.

Immersed in that profound love, he saw what it meant to have no regrets, what it meant to be a moth flinging itself into an open flame, what it

meant to be utterly infatuated, what it meant to be unwavering in one's chosen course.

He didn't have anything like that.

He hadn't given He Yu anything, so how could he say that he loved him?

Chen Man stared at him anxiously. "Ge…don't be like this… Once you're in the United States, you have to get proper treatment for your illness…okay? The investigation and pursuit of Duan Wen is still ongoing. The true puppet master still hasn't been caught. I… I want you to see it. I want you to see the members of the organization that killed Uncle Ping and Auntie Muying, and my dage…and also…He Yu, brought to justice. See them receive the punishment they deserve. It might take a long time, but one day, you'll be able to see it…so long as you are alive."

Chen Man paused. "Ge, did you know? Our investigation found the truth behind the Yi Beihai murder case… Apparently, Duan Wen was even using Yi Beihai as a test subject for the newest formula of obedience potion. Before he came to Huzhou, he had a drink in a gambling den. At the time, he wasn't as intent on killing Lao-Qin, but his drink was spiked; according to Wei Rong, that version of the obedience potion was a complete failure. Duan Wen ordered Yi Beihai to threaten Qin Ciyan and seek vengeance for his mother, while forcing him to reveal secrets about a research dossier. But Yi Beihai went overboard by accident…"

Xie Qingcheng knew which secret dossier they were looking for.

The First Emperor.

Yi Beihai had already been inclined to violence for his own reasons, so Duan Wen had been able to use him for his own purposes without sparking any suspicion. Before, a revelation like this would no doubt have shocked Xie Qingcheng—but now he merely accepted it as fact. It was as if nothing could surprise him or delight him anymore; as if nothing could inspire any sort of emotional response within him.

He was a dead tree, hollowed with rot.

"Ge, there will come a day when Duan Wen will stand before a judge and be convicted for his crimes," Chen Man insisted. "I hope…I hope you can hang on until that day comes to pass. I know you're grieving He Yu's

loss, but…you still have Xie Xue, you still have your nephew who hasn't even entered this world yet, and…" His eyes were red as a rabbit's as he stared at him hesitantly. Mustering his courage, he forged ahead. "And you still have me. We all need you. We can't live without you."

Xie Qingcheng finally broke his silence: "I know what you mean."

"Ge…"

"Chen Man, I may very well have never loved anyone in my life. Perhaps I never loved He Yu either—a man like me has no right to say if I love someone or not."

There was no way to respond to that.

"But as I said before, his position is irreplaceable," Xie Qingcheng continued. "That's how it was in the past, and that's how it will remain in the future. That place will always belong to him and only him. Until the day I die, and beyond it."

Chen Man's eyes filled with tears.

Rising, Xie Qingcheng waved down a waiter and paid their bill. He turned to Chen Man one last time. "Chen Yan, I am not worth yearning for. You should keep walking forward. You will meet someone much better than me. As for me—I killed the person who loved me most with my own hands. The time that I have left is the price I have to pay."

He left, and returned to Moyu Alley alone.

On his way home, he came across a roadside stall selling small dough figurines.

The weather was cooling, and it would soon be time for the Mid-Autumn Festival. Stalls owned by old traditional craftsmen were beginning to pop up on street corners that were out of sight of city management officials.

The old craftsman already had a number of dough figurines on display, propped up on sticks inside cola bottles. There were the usual, traditional characters of Sun Wukong and Chang'e, but there were also Weslie the Pleasant Goat and Doraemon… Xie Qingcheng stared at the sculpture stall as if lost in a beautiful reverie.

"Sir, what would you like to buy?"

Xie Qingcheng emerged from his dream to find that he had inadvertently walked over to the old craftsman, who awoke him with a question. “…Can you make dragons?”

“Of course.” The old man smiled kindly, the creases of his face filled with the kind of benevolence that came with the passage of time. “What kind of dragon would you like?”

“I would like two of them—one red and one silver—placed together.”

The old man considered his request. “Someone once asked me to make this before…”

Inside the pockets of his windbreaker, Xie Qingcheng’s hands curled slightly. He didn’t have to ask to know who had once stood before this very stall and beamed as he made the same request.

He forced the tremor out of his voice. “Is that so…?”

“It was on New Year’s Eve,” the old man recalled with a smile. “I made them for a very handsome young man.”

For the first time, Xie Qingcheng’s voice choked with emotion. “If you could please make them the way you did then, because…” He had to gather himself before he could manage to say the rest. “Because that pair of little dragons were a gift to me.”

A look of pleasant surprise crossed the man’s face. “Do you still have them?”

There was a bitter taste on Xie Qingcheng’s tongue. “I lost them,” he said softly.

The craftsman finished making the little dragons—they looked identical to the ones that He Yu had given him on New Year’s Eve. Xie Qingcheng took them by the bamboo sticks with slightly shaking hands. He solemnly thanked the old man, tucking the little dough figurines into the pocket of his windbreaker that was closest to his heart, and took them home.

The day before he left for America, Xie Qingcheng visited the cemetery by himself.

He Yu no longer had any family in the country, so there was no one who would erect a headstone for him—no one aside from Xie Qingcheng.

The headstone had already been set up, and the mortuary attendant was waiting for the client to bring the body of the deceased.

But Xie Qingcheng didn't have He Yu's body.

All that the police had managed to find of He Yu's remains was some mangled flesh from a missing limb. And there was no way they would give that to him when he didn't have any relation to He Yu. He wasn't his family, wasn't his friend…wasn't his lover.

All he had was a pair of little dragons shaped out of dough.

They were placed in a nanmu box, which he set gently into the grave. Having seen all sorts of grieving spouses, the attendant made no comment, and merely helped him seal the grave.

"Sir, here are your tools." The attendant handed an engraving kit to Xie Qingcheng.

There were no words on the headstone, as the client who'd ordered it told them to leave it blank. He'd merely asked that they bring him a set of engraving tools. This wasn't an unusual request; some wished to personally carve the name of the deceased onto the headstone, as if in doing so, they would be able to engrave it onto the hearts of the living.

Xie Qingcheng accepted the engraving kit. "Thank you."

The attendant gave a shallow bow and stepped away, leaving the couple separated by the veil of death the last of their time together.

Slowly kneeling down before the ice-cold headstone, Xie Qingcheng ran his fingers over the blank expanse of white jade. He did not weep; his lightless eyes were no longer capable of shedding tears.

"Little Devil," he said. "I'm leaving.

"I know that you resent me. It's my fault for treating you so cruelly… I always hoped that you would be able to live a good life on your own, that you would be able to walk out of the shadows by yourself, but I forgot that you needed a bridge to cross over…and I never gave you that bridge."

He pressed his forehead against the ice-cold headstone. "Hate me. It's only right that you do." His softly murmured words scattered on the wind. "I'm sorry, Little Devil. You told me so many times that you loved me, yet I never told you once that actually, I also…"

He stopped.

I what?

He didn’t have the right to say the rest. His eyes closed. Eventually, he swallowed what he couldn’t say back down. He felt his throat sliced to shreds by those words, and he coughed, the faint taste of blood on his tongue.

“…I don’t have much time left in this world,” he said faintly. “I’ll spend these last few years sorting through my teacher’s writings, and then I’ll come see you. I wonder if you’ll want to see me when the time comes.”

Xie Qingcheng ran his fingers gently over the headstone, much like the way he’d once stroked He Yu’s brow.

“I’m sorry…that you fell in love with someone like me… In the end, I couldn’t give you anything in return. I must have made you very sad…”

He sat up slowly and picked up an engraving chisel, opening his eyes to stare down at the blank headstone. He wanted to carve He Yu’s name… but as he was about to start, he found himself recalling the memory of a young He Yu getting a tattoo in secret.

“Who’s copying you? I don’t like you at all! And I don’t admire you either!”

To be honest, he had never been worthy of He Yu’s admiration. He Yu had done far better than him.

He had done far better than all of them.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes once more, pressing his pale, slender fingers to the headstone, and chiseled the first stroke…

As the sun set in the west, a distant bell tower began to ring. Xie Qingcheng knelt amid the dust. His injured arm had never fully recovered, so he only had full use of one hand. Chiseling the words was hard work, and his fingers were soon mottled with blood.

But he didn’t notice the blood, or the dust, or the ringing of the bell. His eyes were fixed on the freshly carved words etched into the headstone.

Nothing of him that doth fade,

But doth suffer a sea-change

Into something rich and strange.

The hand adorned with Keats' epitaph carved the words inscribed on Shelley's gravestone—the words that could not be preserved on He Yu's wrist in life. It was as if this act resolved their ill-fated relationship, the regrets sowed in his youth.

Xie Qingcheng lowered his eyes, ink-dark lashes like the withering wings of a dying butterfly trying and failing to lift beneath the bloodred rays of twilight. He pressed his hand to the ice-cold headstone.

"Little Devil…let me hold you again. One last time."

I beg you, let me hug you the way you always wanted, okay? He Yu… let me hold you, okay?

Heart pressed to the bitterly cold jade, his eyelids fell. The image of a dreamscape, with a Ferris wheel and a figure standing beside it that would never turn back again, filled his mind…

It was so cold. But he rested his forehead against that stone surface and held on for a very, very long time.

Was this how He Yu felt when he hugged him? Like he was holding a wedge of ice, or a block of stone that would never, never hug him back? Like he was kissing frost and snow? It was finally Xie Qingcheng's turn to experience that raw chill for himself. He held onto the stone for only a short while, yet his chest was soon freezing and his limbs went numb.

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How had He Yu persisted for so long? How did he persevere, day after day, never receiving an answer until the day he died…?

Xie Qingcheng wanted to ask the boy why.

He wanted to run up to the He Yu who stood before the Ferris wheel, run up to him and keep him from disappearing, run up to him—

And ask him if it was worth it.

He wanted to ask, *Little Devil, back then…when you begged me again and again…how wretched did it make you feel to receive no response?*

He wanted to ask, *Why did you always stagger to your feet and keep chasing after me until you were battered and bruised, until your flame guttered out?*

He wanted to ask… *He Yu… He Yu… Why were you so determined to keep going?*

Why…would you go that far for someone like me…?

But the boy was gone, and his fervent passion would never come back.

Only this anonymous headstone was left to accompany Xie Qingcheng as he silently faced the reality of death in the fading light of the setting sun. And the headstone was anonymous—all that Xie Qingcheng inscribed there were those three lines of verse.

It was just as their relationship had been: An entanglement that transcended life and death, yet never legitimized, and never named.

The only parts of himself Xie Qingcheng left behind were a few bloody fingerprints. But even then, he carefully wiped the marker down before he left, wiping those tiny spots of red away without a trace, until the headstone was perfectly clean.

Just like that young man’s beautiful and gentle eyes when he smiled.

Those eyes that seemed to say, *Xie Qingcheng, Doctor Xie… Xie-ge, can you hold me? I’m very young, but I really do love you. Please believe me. I’m not lying…*

Xie Qingcheng knelt before the headstone, a hunched figure bathed in bloodred as the slanting rays of the sun finally sank beneath the horizon. His eyes slowly closed once more.

The clamorous cries of a crow returning to its nest echoed across the sky. In accompaniment to this plaintive lament, the final gleam of tremolo light slid behind the clouds, like a teardrop falling to disappear in an instant.

The next day was the day of Xie Qingcheng's flight.

A number of people came to the airport to see him off: Chen Man, Auntie Li, the director of Meiyu, the Wei Family…even Li Ruoqiu. After divorcing her second husband, she had opened a romantic little bar on her own. She had seen the news on the bar's television set; and though, like most people, she didn't know the details of what had happened to Xie Qingcheng, she had lived with him for years, and she could guess at a few things.

Li Ruoqiu was the last person to say goodbye.

In lieu of speaking, she merely stared at him in a daze, a string of tears sliding down her face. In the short span of a year, Xie Qingcheng had lost the light in his left eye, the use of one of his arms, the keenness of his aura, and someone irreplaceable in his heart…

But he had to live on.

She could barely tell it was him. He was still Xie Qingcheng, but he had been damaged beyond recognition. Finally, in a voice choked with emotion, she said, "Xie-ge, I hope that everything goes well for you…"

He met her gaze. "You too. I wish you the best."

"I did so many immature things in the past. I hope you can forgive me."

"All you wanted was a normal relationship, but I couldn't give you one," said Xie Qingcheng. "That was my fault; I hope you will forgive me as well."

Li Ruoqiu wiped her tears before gazing up at him once more. His expression made her terribly sad. It was as if the lamp of his life was already on the verge of burning out. He spoke to her as if this was the last

conversation they would ever have—after all, it remained to be seen whether his treatment in the United States would be successful.

Xie Qingcheng finished saying his goodbyes and headed through immigration. He was leaving the country, yet with less luggage than an ordinary traveler would pack for a simple trip. He carried only a single suitcase filled with some of his clothes, and some notes that he still hadn’t finished organizing.

As for the little Charmander given to him by He Yu, he had reglued it, and it sat in the pocket of his windbreaker.

As the airplane soared into the sky, Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes and lifted his hand to pat the pocket over his heart, touching the lifeless little figure through the fabric. Then he opened his eyes and gazed out the window. The clouds streamed past the cabin of the plane like a river flowing into the sea.

In the end, everything in his past, all the things he once clung to, vanished, carried away by the wind.

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Chapter 193:
An Old Friend

XIE QINGCHENG SETTLED into the nursing home in New York, per the Wei family's arrangements.

It seemed Wei Dongheng was afraid that he would think himself into a corner and suddenly run away—but rather than call it twenty-four hour monitoring, it was nicer to say that someone would be keeping an eye out for him at all times to make sure he was living well.

But his brother-in-law didn't have to worry so much. Xie Qingcheng wouldn't break his promise to Xie Xue; he was ready to cooperate with his treatment. He himself might no longer have any use for his body, but as long as someone else needed a candle in the long, dark night, he would keep on burning his feeble form to ash.

The treatment continued day after day, medicine swallowed handful by handful.

But it wasn't particularly effective, and Xie Qingcheng's spirit had already collapsed. A body was like a container—when it was irreparably broken, any medicine poured into it would only drain out. The only thing that gave him any energy was organizing Qin Ciyan's data. That seemed to be the only spiritual anchor he had left.

Now that he'd moved abroad, everything that happened in his own country was like a distant memory; not only because of the geographical distance, but also the distance of time. Xie Qingcheng's life had become listless, tedious, even depressing. He got up at six in the morning every day, carefully sorted and repaired Qin Ciyan's notes, and then received treatment. After his treatment, he returned bearing an IV drip, only to bury himself back into the data…

The therapist told him not to strain his eyes, so he set timers for himself to rest them every half hour. He'd stand by the window and look out at the large expanse of green grass that lay beside the man-made lake outside. There was a tree by his window, with pale pink flowers that fell

when the breeze blew. The flowers floated onto his desk, where the broken little Charmander sat next to his books and pens.

“I didn’t think you’d like cute things like this.” A nurse tried to chat with him about it. “Can I pick it up to take a look?”

Xie Qingcheng closed his book and looked at her quietly. “I’m sorry. Please don’t touch it.”

He was very uninteresting and taciturn. His one blind and one seeing eye were filled with an icy desolation that kept people at a distance, and he hadn’t smiled a single time since he arrived.

Then again, none of the news he’d received over the past couple of months was very good.

The attack on Mandela Island had failed, and the Guangshi army and police had suffered heavy casualties. Duan Wen possessed advanced thermal and chemical weapons that far exceeded the limits of ordinary technology; according to survivors, the island was now a fortress, littered with traps. It was practically a floating sea monster, its massive, stinking mouth agape, ready to devour any human that dared approach.

Some time later, Huzhou Detention Center sent news that, after a mental break, Wei Rong had willfully revealed important information about the organization and triggered the monitoring chip implanted into her wrist. The chip immediately injected poison into her bloodstream. She twitched and foamed at the mouth, lost consciousness in just ten seconds, and, despite resuscitation efforts, quickly perished.

Though her death was painful and ugly, it was easier than she deserved. After all, she still never confessed, or publicly apologized to the dead or the living, before she lost her life.

The news turned Xie Qingcheng’s expression colder. He wore an almost constant frown, even in his sleep.

After three months in the United States, he was like a walking corpse, his body the only thing that was still alive. His soul had already left with someone else’s, he was riddled with worries and partially blind… He might be in the mortal realm, but it was no different from hell.

And as for He Yu—maybe it was because he hated Xie Qingcheng so much, but he never dreamt of him again. The dream when he bade Xie Qingcheng goodbye under the Ferris wheel was the last.

Over Christmas, the medical center finally allowed Xie Qingcheng to venture out.

Of course, someone had to follow him secretly. They wouldn't dare risk something happening to a patient who'd been sent to them by the Wei family.

Xie Qingcheng donned a black woolen coat that felt heavier than he was. He made his way downtown, where light snow floated through the sky and Christmas trees glowed with colorful lights. There were groups of people—couples, lovers, relatives, and families—all busy shopping for the holidays, carrying bags large and small as they walked down the street. Their faces were filled with bright smiles that seemed so distant to him.

He was the only one who was alone.

He went to Brooklyn, where it was even more lively—he'd finally found his way here, to the place Qin Ciyan had studied when he was younger.

Lao-Qin had once described a flower shop to him. He'd said that besides going to the aquarium, the flower shop was his favorite spot.

Lao-Qin had beamed as he told him about it, his smile tinged with an old man's mischief. He said that when he was in school, he'd admired the girl who worked at the flower shop; she had bright red hair in two braids and cute freckles on her face, and she always wore a royal blue dress and a white linen apron embroidered with the flower shop's logo. She was always busy outside the peacock-green painted shop; when she saw him pass by, she would always call out to him and ask if he wanted to buy a bouquet of lilies.

The flower shop was a family-run business that had been open for over sixty years. Xie Qingcheng found it easily. The owner was busy preparing preordered Christmas bouquets; in the midst of all those flowers, she was like a character from Lao-Qin's fairy tale. She still had those thick braids, a royal blue dress, freckles, and bright eyes.

But she was older now.

The little girl of the past was now a grandmother, her face creased with wrinkles, but the light in her eyes hadn’t faded. They were still full of life and fragrance.

Xie Qingcheng, in that moment, suddenly envied her.

“Sir, would you like to buy some flowers?”

“Yes,” he said, walking into the warmly decorated shop to look around. Finally, he said, “I would like a bouquet of lilies.”

The grandma carefully wrapped the flowers in golden-red paper and handed them to him. Flowers in hand, he got into a cab and gave the driver an address from his phone.

An hour later, he arrived at a small, white house on the outskirts of the city. He looked at the name on the mailbox, walked through the garden fenced off by a small hedge just in front of the building, and knocked on the door.

The door opened. Inside was a pretty biracial child who stared at him with big blue eyes. Qin Rongbei’s husband came out—he and his daughter had both been to the sanatorium to see Xie Qingcheng, so they both recognized him. He stepped forward to hug Xie Qingcheng, and accepted the bouquet of pale pink and white lilies.

“She didn’t suffer much in her final years.” As they sat in the warm living room, fireplace crackling, Qin Rongbei’s husband brought out tea and snacks. Observing Xie Qingcheng’s thinning face, he said, “But her pain seems to be burdening you. Mister Xie, would you like some ginger cookies? We baked them ourselves.”

Xie Qingcheng thanked him and took one from the cookie tin with a bear printed on it. He nibbled on it slowly.

“When she was alive, she baked much tastier cookies than I ever could.” His expression became very gentle when he mentioned his wife. “Actually, she excelled at everything she did. A lot of people disliked her, though—some of them laughed at her for being a researcher, saying the lab wasn’t a place for women and that girls should marry early. She exposed the

dark side of a charity foundation, but some said she had ulterior motives. She gave speeches advocating for women and children, and some people said she was just putting on a show. There were even lunatics who doubted our marriage, a thing of love—they said that after her success with her studies, she must have forgotten her roots to marry a foreigner like me and move here. But I am her family. I understand what she's done in her life, and no matter what others said, she insisted on doing what she wanted to do—doing the right thing. So, Mr. Xie—"

He refilled Xie Qingcheng's cup with hot tea. "When she was kidnapped, she still chose to protect your secret. I imagine she must have thought it over carefully. If she could have spoken to you clearly later on, I know she would have told you that she didn't regret it. She never regretted any one of her decisions. And if I'd known you were doing those experiments for her sake, that the medicine was obtained from you torturing your own body…" The man shook his head. "We wouldn't have agreed to it."

"Mommy said she's a scientist, so she's not afraid of death, just mistakes," declared Qin Rongbei's daughter, who'd been decorating the Christmas tree nearby.

The man smiled gently. "You heard her. That's what we all think."

Xie Qingcheng stayed silent.

"Mister Xie, we haven't done anything that we regret, so don't blame yourself. Please take your treatment seriously, and continue organizing the notes my father-in-law left behind before he passed."

Before Xie Qingcheng left, the father and daughter gave him a Christmas gift. He opened it to find a drawing, framed in oak. It was the "My Family" that Qin Rongbei had painted and tucked into her photo album before her death. But the face that was originally blank, that belonged to Xie Qingcheng, was now filled in.

"I drew it in," Qin Rongbei's daughter told him. "Mommy never saw you when she was clearheaded, so she couldn't draw your face. But I could."

Xie Qingcheng put the gift away carefully, said goodbye, and got into a cab. He stared at the framed drawing the whole way back—until he

arrived at a street near the sanatorium.

“Here is fine,” said Xie Qingcheng. “I want to walk the rest of the way on my own.”

He paid the bill and got out.

He stopped at a nearby store and bought some tape to affix the painting to the wall. When he got back to the sanatorium, he put the frame on the wall next to his bed.

My family is by my side. My family, after tonight, and every night, will finally be with me forever. We are together in life and death, but he is missing.

Because he didn’t do anything wrong except for loving me. Because I didn’t let anyone down except him.

The moonlight shone bright outside the window.

The snow melted, the flowers bloomed, and in the blink of an eye, gentle spring arrived to the world.

Xie Qingcheng’s condition went up and down. He didn’t improve much, but he didn’t deteriorate. He lived listlessly, with no change in his expression.

The days repeated, one after another.

Until one drizzling evening, as Xie Qingcheng was buying some lilies from the flower shop in Brooklyn. He was just raising his hand to hail a cab when he received a call.

Wei Dongheng’s voice, bursting with excitement, came through the other end of the phone. “Ge, it’s a bit early…we weren’t prepared at all… born this morning…”

Xie Qingcheng stopped in his tracks. Xie Xue had gone into labor much earlier than projected. He had never imagined it would happen now, on this seemingly ordinary night.

Someone was celebrating a birthday in a garden restaurant further down the street, the tune of “Happy Birthday” wafting over the fuzzy drizzle. The lights of the road reflected in Xie Qingcheng’s pupils. It was the first time in several months that any light had shown in his eyes at all.

It sounded like there were a lot of people celebrating and cheering on the other end of the phone. Amid the noise, the phone was handed off—Xie Xue's gentle, weak voice traversed the ocean to reach Xie Qingcheng's ears.

"Ge, it's a girl… You're an uncle now."

The phone call somehow ended. It was the best news he'd heard in several years. Xie Qingcheng almost wanted to smile a little bit, but the corners of his mouth seemed to be rusted shut.

Raindrops hit his umbrella with a pitter-patter sound.

There was a gust of wind, and suddenly the decorative tulle covering his bouquet was blown away, flying into the air and landing across the street, where a boy wearing rain boots and holding a transparent umbrella picked it up. The boy, about seven or eight years old, looked around before crossing the street and trotting over to Xie Qingcheng.

Looking up from under the umbrella, fabric in hand, he handed it to him just as He Yu had when they first met. "Mister, you dropped this."

In that moment—Xie Qingcheng held the phone. In the wake of a new life's birth and the reflection of an old friend, his body was suddenly filled to the brim with emotions he hadn't felt in a long time, emotions that belonged to a living human.

The corners of his mouth, his eyebrows, and his face that hadn't held an expression for nearly a year suddenly showed great pain—this was something to be happy about, but looking at the panic-stricken child in front of him, he just couldn't bear it anymore. He bent down in the sprinkling spring twilight and finally burst into silent tears.

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“Mister? Mister? What’s wrong?” The child stepped forward and grabbed his hand. “Did…something happen? Can I help?”

As far as he could remember, Xie Qingcheng had never, ever cried so hard before.

And on the streets of New York, where nobody knew or would remember him, after a year of despair and anguish he just couldn’t bear it anymore, and tears streamed down his face. Those hot, blazing tears flowed like blood pouring from his heart. He looked at the child in front of him, with an eye that could see and an eye that could not.

The child’s face blurred, and he could almost see his little devil in front of him again, saying, “Xie Qingcheng, look. New life will come, and I’ve been gone so long already…”

It’s already been nearly a year, Xie Qingcheng.

The dead have turned to ash. New life has finally come. It’s time to let go…

For anyone else, it would have been time to let go.

But Xie Qingcheng knew he couldn’t do it. He lifted his hand and covered his damp eyelashes. His heart felt like a knife had rent it through, like something clogged his throat.

He knew that he would never be able to let go. He could be happy for the birth of a new life, but he was destined to live among the dead forever.

He wouldn’t forget He Yu’s past, ever.

He took the wet tulle and said thank you, but he said it to the little devil in his memories who would never return. The boy who called out to him for the first time on the lawn, more than a decade ago.

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Chapter 194:
Return Home

TWO YEARS later.

"Mister Xie, you have to take your medicine on time. We'll provide the dosage to Meiyu Private Hospital, and you must take one injection every two months," the brown-haired, blue-eyed doctor explained to Xie Qingcheng from behind his surgical mask.

He was still in the sanatorium in New York.

"Though your condition has improved, you'll lose all the progress you've made so far if you don't take good care of yourself," the doctor went on. "We suggest that you come back for hospitalization after you've sorted out your personal business… Don't give up hope. We've been developing a special medicine that can cure the side effects of RN-13. If you can hold out just one more year, it'll be much more likely that you'll be able to receive it—"

"Thank you. I understand," Xie Qingcheng interrupted. He'd been speaking to this doctor regularly for two years, and he knew this man was a chatterbox. If Xie Qingcheng let him continue, there would be no end to it.

Wrapped in a plain, black woolen windbreaker, Xie Qingcheng pulled his suitcase into a cab, and headed to the airport.

He was ready to go home.

Continuous, precise treatment had allowed him to maintain some organ function. His health was still poor, but as long as he continued to take his medicine, he'd be able to last another couple of years without dying from organ failure. But his eyesight was still declining, and he now had to wear glasses to prevent the world from going blurry.

The doctor was an idealist. When he wasn't talking scientifically, he would tell Xie Qingcheng that eyes were the windows to the soul. *Do you know why your eyes aren't cured, and why they're getting worse? It must be because your heart is sealed. Deep down, you don't want to see what's happening around you, so your eyes have given up on themselves.*

Xie Qingcheng however, was a materialist, and all the doctor got for his trouble was a cold look. You could almost see Xie Qingcheng rolling his eyes.

Another of the doctor's suggestions was that he have an additional operation—a scientist in their partnered research institute had invented an artificial eye. The eye was beautiful, and after surgical implantation it would be indistinguishable from the patient's original eye and work as well as the real thing. But Xie Qingcheng refused it. He was in no mood to worry about his eyes; he didn't know how much longer he was going to live either way.

During his trip home, he had a very important task to complete. In the aftermath of the naval battle, the military and police had launched an investigation into Duan Wen's group—known as the "Mandela Syndicate"—and RN-13. Xie Qingcheng had cooperated with their investigations a few times over the last two years, but other than a few relevant details, they assumed that the wider case had nothing to do with him.

Recently, however, the director of Meiyu Hospital and Captain Zheng had suddenly called him to inform him that a serious medical case had occurred in China. Criminals were selling generic drugs to leukemia patients through private channels. The drug was very expensive if purchased through the proper channels, so many families could only buy so-called "alternatives"—and some took advantage of this to sell them a large number of experimental drugs.

The ingredients of the drug were very similar to the obedience potion derived from RN-13, and it was officially coined "Obedience Potion No. 2." Anyone who took it was susceptible to being mentally controlled at any time, but it should have just been a test product. Shortly after a victim carried out the commands they were given, they would rapidly become mentally unstable, with dementia-like symptoms. Never mind being controlled—the victim wouldn't listen to anyone. Confining them in a mental hospital was the best anyone could do for them.

When the police found out about this, they promptly cut off the Obedience Potion No. 2 supply chain, destroyed seven suspected criminal gangs, and arrested hundreds of suspects.

Unfortunately, the suspects arrested were just smugglers who shipped goods from the Golden Triangle area, and their connection with the middleman was completely cut off. Though the police knew that Duan Wen must have been the one to release this experimental drug on such a large scale, they had no proof.

The effects of the drug brought the police a great deal of trouble, because some users didn't dare to admit they'd taken it. They were determined to hide it, taking a gamble on the possibility that it might work. But once it was activated, they couldn't control themselves at all. In the past month, individuals who took Obedience Potion No. 2 had been involved in six instances of aggravated assault. Public opinion could no longer be suppressed, and developing an effective treatment for those affected as soon as possible became of utmost importance.

And no one was more familiar with RN-13 than Xie Qingcheng, so they needed him back immediately.

His patients and his country needed him—he had no choice but to return. When the plane landed at Huzhou International Airport, Xie Qingcheng dragged his luggage out of customs to find Xie Xue, Wei Dongheng, their daughter, and Auntie Li waiting. Auntie Li was a bit older now, but she still seemed plenty energetic. She often helped Xie Xue take care of her child; she was basically half her grandmother. As soon as she saw Xie Qingcheng, she burst into tears, crying and smiling all at once. He went to comfort her, but before he could reach her side there was a blur in front of him—

"Ge!"

Xie Xue flashed forward like lightning. Even though she was the mother of a two-year-old child now, she still hugged him as tightly as she had when she was a little girl.

Xie Xue had flown to the United States to visit him last year, but she hadn't stayed for long. After all, she had a family, and had a newborn who needed her mother—so now that Xie Qingcheng had returned, she was beside herself with excitement.

"Ge, are you tired? Come on, let's get you home. Everything's ready for you—I had Xiao-Wei install a super comfortable jacuzzi for you, so let's go straight home. You can take a proper bath and rest for a bit…" As she

chattered on, Wei Dongheng came over with the two-year-old Wei Mengya in his arms.

"Ge," he said, smiling. He raised his daughter's hand and had her wave to him. "Come on, Yaya. Say 'Uncle.'"

Wei Mengya's parents had forced her to video call with her uncle in the United States on numerous occasions, not that she knew what a video call was. When she saw Xie Qingcheng, her black, bean-like eyes widened, she drooled, and she suddenly giggled:

"Unco!"

Xie Qingcheng stared.

Xie Xue could tell from the subtle shift in her brother's expression that his DNA had changed.

She was no longer the best person to make Xie Qingcheng live well. Instead, now, that was Yaya. The ever-fatherly Xie Qingcheng watched the child trying to throw herself into his arms—his face barely moved a muscle, but Xie Xue knew he loved it. He was used to taking care of people and looking after children. Yaya even looked a lot like Xie Xue had as a baby, so every time he looked at her, he felt like he was holding his infant sister in his arms again, watching her grow up.

Xie Xue struck while the iron was hot and shoved Yaya into Xie Qingcheng's arms. Caught off guard, he reflexively lifted his hands to take her. His posture was flawless—even more so than the child's mother. "What are you doing…"

"Unco!" Before Xie Qingcheng could frown at Xie Xue, Yaya happily lifted her pink little arms, as round as lotus roots, and hugged Xie Qingcheng's neck. The soft, warm child fell into his arms, so delicate that she would melt if he used even a bit of force. Xie Qingcheng's sharp eyes naturally softened.

He ducked his head and replied, "Mm."

Children could sense a person whose aura made them feel at ease. Just leaning into Xie Qingcheng's arms made Yaya so happy. She rocked in his hold and wriggled her hands. Then, out of nowhere, she puckered her lips and kissed Xie Qingcheng's cool cheek.

“Uncah…”

Xie Qingcheng was rendered speechless.

Xie Xue looked at him expectantly.

Xie Qingcheng sighed and unzipped his black windbreaker, revealing the simple white button-down he wore underneath. He tucked the child into his jacket and let her lean against his chest. “She’s wearing so little even though it’s so cold? What kind of mother are you? And you—” He glanced at Wei Dongheng. “Don’t you know you have to support her neck when you hold her?”

Yaya didn’t understand, but she could feel her parents’ embarrassment, and she found it hilarious. She laughed and gurgled in Xie Qingcheng’s arms, clinging to her uncle.

Beside them, Auntie Li started laughing. “This reminds me of how Xiao-Xie used to take care of Xiao-Xue.”

Xie Qingcheng cleared his throat. “That was such a long time ago. Please don’t mention it again… Let’s go home.”

The police didn’t bother Xie Qingcheng for the first couple of days, intending to give him some time to rest. But thanks to Yaya, he barely could.

Though he was a strict, cold man, and his eyes were naturally icy and sharp, the child loved him; she wanted him to hold her almost twenty-four hours a day. She’d throw herself into his arms and refuse to let go, and any time she was put down, she’d cry. With Uncle around, she didn’t even need her mother anymore, much less Wei Dongheng.

Wei Dongheng didn’t get it. “How am I not as good as your brother? Why does she only want him and not me?”

Xie Xue was equally puzzled. “How would I know? She doesn’t want me, either. I noticed he was tired while he was holding her this morning, so I tried to take her, saying Mommy was here to hold her now, but she just started crying—she burrowed into his arms even more and said she wanted Uncle, not Mommy…”

“It’s not like your brother can give her any milk. He’s a full-grown man who doesn’t radiate a bit of motherly aura—what’s going on?”

Auntie Li smiled as she knitted a sweater. “It’s probably that sense of security that human children feel intuitively. It is true that he’s much more reliable than either of you.”

The parents had no retort to that.

With a sigh, Auntie Li looked over at Xie Qingcheng, who was holding the child near the window. Yaya was sleeping soundly in his arms; he looked exhausted, but he didn’t put her down. He sat in a Windsor chair in the sunroom with her still in his arms, closing his eyes to rest for a bit as he let Yaya get her fill of the sun. His appearance was strong and soft, cold yet gentle. Though it would normally be unusual to describe a family member this way, it perfectly conveyed the sight of this man holding a baby.

Her gaze dimmed. “It’s a pity he doesn’t have his own child. It would do wonders for his depression…”

Sitting in the sunshine like this, Xie Qingcheng was peaceful. When he was with Yaya, he showed a calmness and gentleness he had lacked all of the past three years.

A week after Xie Qingcheng returned to Huzhou, Chen Man finished whatever business he’d needed to take care of and came to visit.

He had been living in Guangshi for the past two years, and had grown a lot in that time. He’d recently transferred back to Huzhou to join the criminal investigation team that his brother was a part of. Alongside Zheng Jingfeng, he was working on the Duan Wen case—and the team dealing with the case was now too large to just be referred to as the “Mandela Syndicate Task Force.” Thus, they took up the moniker of the operation which had defeated Lü Zhishu, calling themselves the “Dreambreakers.”

An appropriate name—the name of Duan Wen’s organization was “Mandela,” from the so-called “Mandela effect.” It called to mind illusion, nihilism, and fanatical belief. The investigative forces now became the sword which would break this illusion.

Chen Man, of course, was a core member of the Dreambreakers.

After such a long period apart, Xie Qingcheng was somewhat stunned when he saw Chen Man at the coffee shop they'd agreed to meet at. He had a tan, now, and a subtle scar on his face. The police rank insignia on his shoulder was different, too—but the biggest change was his temperament.

Although he was a police officer, Chen Man had always looked like a student—his face and his temperament made him seem immature. Now though, he had the aura of a man, and there was a sharpness to his eyes that had never been there before.

When his eyes met Xie Qingcheng's, though, his gaze softened.

"Xie-ge," said Chen Man. "Long time no see."

"Take a seat."

Chen Man sat down across from him.

At his doctor's recommendation, Xie Qingcheng had rarely used his cell phone while he was recovering in the United States. Occasionally he'd use the computer room to access the Internet and make voice or video calls to his family, but that was it—so Chen Man had only been able to hear about Xie Qingcheng through Xie Xue. This was the first time he'd seen Xie Qingcheng's face in three years.

Officer Chen stared at Xie Qingcheng for a long time. "Are you…all right?" he said at last.

Xie Qingcheng nodded. "And you?"

"I couldn't tell you if I'm good or not—none of us will feel at ease until Duan Wen is caught. We've been fighting him for three years, but he's so cunning that he hasn't stepped into the country once in that time. He always has other people take care of things for him. People with no criminal records, and it's hard to obtain evidence that they were even in contact with Duan Wen in the first place. There's been both large and small conflicts, and fifty-seven comrades have died…and the case still isn't resolved. He's still out there, releasing fake drugs."

He sighed. "Sometimes, it feels like the naval battle was just an accident that happened yesterday. I've been so busy with this case, time flies."

“I can tell you’ve changed and grown a lot,” said Xie Qingcheng.

Chen Man studied him for a bit. “…But some things haven’t changed.”

Xie Qingcheng understood what he meant. “That’s true of me as well,” he said.

The light in Chen Man’s eyes dimmed a little.

In the past two, three years, he had never let go of Xie Qingcheng. He still liked him, even as he was now blind, visibly exhausted, and not as handsome as before… Knowing all that, seeing all that, even as he was perfectly aware that Xie Qingcheng was like this because of another man… still he liked him.

But thankfully, across the slow cycle of days and nights, Chen Man’s mentality had improved. He wasn’t so broken now, no longer so unwilling to accept reality as he was the first time he’d found out about Xie Qingcheng and He Yu.

Chen Man was an ordinary man. A man like him might be deeply reluctant, persistent, and have difficulty letting go of his feelings…but he still could slowly walk out of them.

No ordinary man would become like He Yu had been: A person who could give up everything to have the person he wanted, who would burn his life out for a relationship. His obsession was deeply etched into his bones and intertwined with his soul.

Without RN-13, no one else would become sick in the way that he was ever again.

Chen Man was dejected for a moment, but, regathering his spirits, he forced a smile. “Let’s not talk about that for now. I have some business to discuss with you.”

“Go on.”

He filled Xie Qingcheng in on the current domestic spread of Obedience Potion No. 2. “Our preliminary statistics show at least three hundred victims, but less than half have reported to us. They’re cancer patients, and many have little time left—they’re scared, and they don’t want

to be quarantined in a mental hospital and lose their last bit of time with their families. Which is understandable."

He paused. "But if this carries on, cases of Obedience Potion No. 2 users going crazy and hurting people will only increase, and the public will get more and more afraid of them—it could even lead to discrimination against leukemia patients. People get worked up so easily, they'll naturally associate leukemia with Obedience Potion No. 2… None of us want to see that happen."

Xie Qingcheng frowned. Chen Man was right.

Once public fear spread to a certain extent, extremists would inevitably emerge. Typical extremists would find themselves united internally despite their differences, as they battled demonized outsiders and tilted at windmills. They lacked logic and couldn't think for themselves, much like Nazis. They would believe in their own ideas as if they were a religion, constantly fabricating and sensationalizing rumors to exaggerate conflicts and bring more people into the group…

If the Obedience Potion No. 2 problem wasn't solved quickly, fanatics like that would use "protecting the stability of society" as an excuse for all manner of atrocities. They were far more terrifying than any of the victims of Obedience Potion No. 2, and the harm they could cause to society was immeasurable.

"We need to develop a medicative treatment for Obedience Potion No. 2 as soon as possible, and every day we can shorten the crisis by is vital. That's why the Dreambreakers asked you to return. If you're willing to help, I'll take you to enter your biometrics into our system sometime in the next couple of days, and you can use all our laboratories and experimental equipment as you wish."

As Chen Man spoke, he took out an emerald-green leather envelope with a seal on it. "This is the invitation letter my superior asked me to give you. It also contains the contact information for all the important people in the Dreambreakers."

Xie Qingcheng opened it to see many familiar names, from Chen Man to Zheng Jingfeng, and even the hospital director…

“Duan Wen is getting more and more powerful. After Wei Rong died, all the branches of his organization here were reshuffled, so we’ve found it difficult to determine exactly which companies work with him now. But we know for certain that his Mandela Syndicate has a new higher-up: someone very powerful, who’s managed to completely control the situation that Wei Rong and Huang Zhilong could only ever stabilize.”

Xie Qingcheng looked up with a frown. “Who is it?”

“According to the messages we’ve intercepted, his code name is ‘Diavolo.’ That’s all we know so far.”

“A foreigner?”

“He seems to be Chinese, based on what he deals in. Diavolo has been handling all of Duan Wen’s domestic business for some time, but he’s never shown his face. They say that he has no dark background; he established his cooperation with Duan Wen in Australia. We don’t have any extradition clauses with Australia, never mind cross-border investigations—so though we know he’s Duan Wen’s lackey, we can’t officially pin him as an accomplice. Everyone knows the truth about him, but without any evidence, all we can do is watch him.”

“He’s quite capable,” Xie Qingcheng remarked.

Chen Man nodded. “But Diavolo appears to have completed everything he needs to take care of undercover, so his next move will be to openly return to China. He’s completely clean, no criminal record, so he’ll be able to enter the country like any successful entrepreneur. We’re focused on him next. He’s definitely already prepared for us if he’s making this step—turning a hidden card into an open card—but no matter how foolproof his plan is, I know we’ll find holes in it eventually.”

“When does he plan on entering the country?”

“Next week,” said Chen Man. “He’s invited several entrepreneurs to a banquet at the club he’s invested in. I’m going along as a patrolling police officer. If I hear anything about Obedience Potion No. 2 at the banquet, I’ll let you know immediately.”

Xie Qingcheng nodded. “Be careful.”

“It’s fine—he won’t act rashly. He knows there’ll be a lot of eyes on him right now, when he’s just returned to China,” said Chen Man slowly. “But I’ll be careful.”

The tea was finished, but heat still lingered in the cup.

Their discussion had just about wrapped up when Xie Xue called to ask when Xie Qingcheng would be coming home. Yaya, she said, refused to sleep without her uncle there. Xie Qingcheng was at a loss for words.

“Ge, I’ll take you home,” offered Chen Man.

Xie Qingcheng paused. “No need,” he said. “I’ll take a cab. You should rest soon.”

On the way home from the café, Xie Qingcheng thought through everything Chen Man had said. He felt hatred and unease in his heart. Two years had passed, yet Duan Wen had not surrendered—on the contrary, he’d regrouped to recruit more people. He now possessed a powerful ally who seemed determined to oppose the Dreambreakers to the bitter end.

This ‘Diavolo’…

For some reason, that name set Xie Qingcheng’s heart trembling and his temples throbbing.

What kind of person was Diavolo?

He learned the answer to that question a week later.

On a weekend night at home, Xie Qingcheng had just finished looking over some experimental data; he was getting up to make a cup of hot ginger tea at the tea table when he heard an announcement on the television in his room.

“Breaking news! Breaking news! Returning from Australia…his first appearance…revealed soon…”

It was time for a break, so as he drank his ginger tea, he walked to the TV to change the channel. But before he could press the button, he saw that the channel was reporting news from Huzhou’s business sector in real time—about this dashing young entrepreneur, the man known as Diavolo, returning to the country.

The reporter at the airport was shocked in spite of herself. For a moment, Diavolo's true appearance stunned everyone there—and then they all broke out into shouts of amazement.

Xie Qingcheng felt like time was flowing backward. His hand shook. His cup fell to the ground. Scalding tea spilled across his shirt—but he didn't seem to notice. He stared at the screen with one seeing eye, the dim light of the television illuminating his suddenly bloodless face.

The camera angle switched and zoomed in, the scene lit up by glaring flashes, and as the reporters came back to their senses and yelled…Xie Qingcheng saw a figure that, for years now, he hadn't even seen in his dreams.

A tall young man walked out of customs wearing a lead-toned silver suit, a tie of the same color, and a simple, stylish white button-up. He looked more mature and handsome than he had before the naval battle—healthy, gentle, and impeccably poised. When the camera pushed toward his face, he offered a perfunctory smile and turned his almond eyes to the lens. There wasn't so much as a hint of a real smile in his gaze.

He Yu!

Xie Qingcheng's ears began to ring, as if a massive wave had crashed against him. His mind went blank.

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Chapter 195:
We Meet Again

HE YU'S APPEARANCE came as a shock to everyone.

Obviously, what could be more exciting than the resurrection of a courageous man who had risked his life for justice?

People who knew He Yu felt like they were dreaming, and none more so than the Dreambreakers who knew about Diavolo's criminal enterprises—almost the entire time they'd been up against Duan Wen, Diavolo had brought them no shortage of trouble. Though they had no proof that Diavolo was Duan Wen's accomplice, it was certain that this was the man who replaced Lü Zhishu and Huang Zhilong.

But now, reality was telling them that Diavolo was He Yu, the boy who risked his life to help the police solve the case. How could he be working for Duan Wen?!

Of course, since there was no way to prove that He Yu was working for Duan Wen, he naturally received immense support and massively preferential treatment as the resurrected hero who had "sacrificed" himself in the past.

The story he told was that he hadn't been blown into pieces that year, but instead fell into the ocean after the blast, where he was found and rescued by an Australian ship. The mangled foot and flesh the police found and identified as his remains had just been sliced off by shrapnel; it wasn't a fatal injury. Eventually, he'd had a steel bone inserted into his foot, went through a very new and advanced medical operation, and survived without any lasting damages to his body.

For the past three years, He Yu had been living in Australia. To avoid trouble, he never showed himself in public until he'd recovered both his energy and health, at which point he returned to China.

His words were enough to fool the unknowing public, but the police didn't buy this flimsy story for a moment. Zheng Jingfeng called Xie Qingcheng at once and warned him to be careful.

“I don’t know what happened, but He Yu’s changed,” he said. “I believe that he will come find you now that he’s back. Don’t get too close to him—it won’t do you any good.”

Even the higher-ups told him that if He Yu came looking for him, he wasn’t to tell him anything about the Dreambreakers.

They were overthinking it.

After that first public appearance, He Yu didn’t give Xie Qingcheng a single call or send him a single message, much less pay him a visit. Nobody but Xie Qingcheng knew that the choice he’d made before the naval battle had completely broken He Yu’s heart.

He was the one who had hurt He Yu. No matter what anyone else said, and no matter what the result would be, Xie Qingcheng wanted to see He Yu just once.

That night, Xie Qingcheng locked himself in the house and stared at his phone in a daze—on the screen was an instant messaging app, with He Yu’s contact open. As soon as he pressed the send button, they would be able to contact one another.

He had always been a courageous, confident person, but in that moment, he felt something like cowardice fill his feeble body. Xie Qingcheng still had the same phone from years ago, so their past messages were still there.

Up until the heart-wrenching exchange during the naval battle, the words on the screen were those of a young man who was infatuated with him and didn’t bother hiding it. Xie Qingcheng couldn’t connect the boy in these messages to the elegant, indifferent “Executive He” on the TV earlier—and even less to Diavolo, Duan Wen’s suspected collaborator.

He pondered how he might talk to He Yu, but he was so old-fashioned that he couldn’t really come up with any new ideas for a message to send. He thought about it for an entire night, typing and deleting message after message in the chat box—he even wrote a draft on his table with pen and paper.

But in the end, he realized that, being who he was now, the only way he could start a message was, “Hello. How are you?”

He hesitated, his finger hovering over the send button. But he finally made up his mind. One second passed, then two—

He pressed it.

Whoosh. The message sent successfully.

Xie Qingcheng leaned back in his seat, visibly exhausted, and sighed deeply. He didn't think sending a simple message would leave him drenched in sweat.

And then began the long wait.

He waited a full day and night. Whenever his phone vibrated, he would check it, but when he saw it wasn't He Yu, his heart would sink even deeper.

He waited and waited.

From hope to disappointment.

In the end, there was only a bottomless despair.

All night long, Xie Qingcheng lay in bed, clutching his sweaty old cell phone as he stared at the ceiling with empty eyes. Maybe He Yu used to feel the same while waiting for his response. When he was in pain, he continuously sent him messages saying, "Doctor Xie, I'm sick…I'm sick."

Back then, Xie Qingcheng ignored him.

Now, all that despair had come full circle to make its home in Xie Qingcheng's heart.

The faint rays of dawn shone through the clouds. The light grew brighter and brighter, illuminating the long night. The sun rose and the moon set—then, slowly, the sky grew dim.

When the light had once again been swallowed by darkness and the world returned to its primordial state, Xie Qingcheng knew that He Yu would never reply to his message.

He lay in bed, numb, and sent one final text.

It said, "He Yu, I'm sorry."

This time, he no longer hoped for anything. Once it was sent, he put down the sweat-sticky phone he had held onto for a full day and night.

He knew that He Yu would never respond again.

He couldn’t see He Yu, and wouldn’t receive a response to anything he sent him. Even when he tried calling, nobody answered.

But Xie Qingcheng still cared about him a great deal. When he returned home each day, he turned on the television in hopes of hearing news about He Yu. He appeared on television once in a while, as business news found his appearance to be the key to higher ratings.

It was good that he could still see him on the screen, at least. As long as he was still alive and able to smile, it didn’t matter if the smile was for Xie Qingcheng or not. It was good.

Even if it hurt to look at, it was good.

One day, Xie Qingcheng returned from the laboratory late. It was almost nine o’clock by the time he got back to Moyu Alley.

He hadn’t spent too long staying with the Wei family. After all, that was Xie Xue’s husband’s home. Even if the Wei family had plenty of big rooms and didn’t care much either way, Xie Qingcheng wasn’t used to living in another man’s house.

It was snowing gently outside. Winter in the south was wet and cold. Xie Qingcheng coughed lightly as he returned home, turned on the heater, and took off his coat before walking over to the tea table to take his medicine.

He started in surprise, though, when he went to pick out his medications. He had good habits; he was used to keeping his things neat, like an operating table. He recalled that he’d put the medicine boxes neatly on the corner of the table before leaving in the morning, but now, they were messily arranged and placed randomly in the center.

Perhaps Auntie Li had been in the house. She had a key.

He took his medicine without thinking about it too much. He turned on the TV and went to the bathroom for a quick shower. When he came out, the evening news had already started.

He Yu had taken an exclusive interview with the Huzhou local channel to talk about his current business ventures. Xie Qingcheng sat in

front of the screen and watched. For the program's full hour-and-a-half runtime, his one good eye was fixed on He Yu, staring at the boy who was once so bright, now calmly responding to all sorts of tricky questions.

As the interview wrapped up, the host wasn't satisfied with just talking about business; she tried to dig up some personal information too.

"Mr. He, have you been lonely in Australia over the past couple of years? Have you missed anyone?"

"I'm used to being alone. As for missing someone…" He Yu smiled gently, unexpectedly sweet. "Well, if I knew a charming woman like you before the naval battle, then I would have had someone worth missing."

It was a natural, likeable answer.

Xie Qingcheng sat quietly in front of the TV, so silent a person could have been forgiven for thinking there was no life in him. He looked at He Yu smiling, and wanted to try to smile too. But his lips wouldn't move, and his heart felt as if it had been cut by a knife.

When he went to sleep after the program, perhaps due to the unbearable pain of it all, Xie Qingcheng had a fever. He lay in bed, his body burning hot. Through the haziness, he could almost hear He Yu's soft voice.*"Ge, if you're afraid of the cold, I can hold you in your sleep. I'll warm your bed for free. Don't push me away, okay?"*

His fever warmed the blanket, and it felt to him that He Yu was really holding him in bed.

"I won't push you away," he murmured. "He Yu…I won't push you away anymore…"

But are you willing to come back? Are you still willing to come back to me…?

Nobody responded.

At the end of a confused and unconscious night, Xie Qingcheng couldn't tell whether there were warm tears between his eyelashes or not. There was no one beside him, of course, when he woke up the next day. Only the little Charmander standing cutely on the desk.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes and gently brushed his fingers over the warm blanket, smoothing the afterglow of his dream before returning to

reality. He had to calm down. His dreams were the only place he had the right to be sad.

When he got up, he saw that there was a message on his phone. He opened it. It was sent by someone he had no interest in—asking if He Yu had contacted him.

This person wasn't someone Xie Qingcheng knew particularly well, so they weren't checking up on him. They were only trying to satisfy their own desire to pry into his private affairs under the guise of worry. People who knew them both all assumed that He Yu would look for him. Occasionally, people would ask about the situation—but when they found out He Yu had never contacted him, they were all surprised, sighed, and said He Yu had changed.

There was no need for them to remind him again and again. Xie Qingcheng knew that better than anyone else.

It was hard for him to contact He Yu, but it would be easy for He Yu to find him. His number, email, WeChat…nothing had changed. He'd even moved back to Moyu Alley. If He Yu had the inclination to see him, he could speed over to the quiet old alley anytime, anywhere, just like he did in the past. But he never came.

The passionate young man of the past had died.

The person who came back, miraculously alive, understandably wanted to stay as far away from him as possible.

The final time Xie Qingcheng was willing to humiliate himself to find He Yu was because of a news interview.

The journalist mentioned the foot injury He Yu had sustained during the naval battle. He smiled and said it was nothing, that it had healed well and he was perfectly healthy. But when the host asked him again if it really didn't hurt at all, He Yu fell silent for a bit.

He smiled and said, "Truthfully, it's a little uncomfortable on rainy days."

"Don't you need more time to rest and recover?"

"It's nothing. It's healed."

“Can you show us the wound? If that’s all right.”

He Yu didn’t really care: He showed the camera.

From a distance, there seemed to be nothing wrong with his foot below his ankle. But close up, the bionic prosthesis was obvious—permanent, unremovable, with subtle sutures where real flesh was closely connected.

Xie Qingcheng knew that no matter how successful an operation was, the area where things reconnected would hurt and need nurturing. And yet He Yu was attending all sorts of business meetings lately, as if he couldn’t stop for so much as a moment. So Xie Qingcheng went to the entrance of the New He Group headquarters, wanting to give He Yu some special medicine for injuries that he’d obtained from an older doctor; traditional Chinese medicine was a great help to patients who needed long-term treatment and pain relief.

He didn’t expect He Yu to forgive him, or to ever care about him again. But he hoped that he could at least feel better and accept a piece of his kindness.

The herbal medicine and ointment were placed in a paper bag. He didn’t want to bother He Yu, so at first he only mentioned that there was a note with his surname in the bag, so He Yu should know who it was from after he read it. But the security guard said he had to notify He Yu before he could make any arrangements. Xie Qingcheng had no choice but to give his name.

The security guard left to make a call and hung up shortly after. When he came back, his expression was cold, even a little wary.

“Sir, Executive He said he doesn’t know you, so he will not accept the items.”

Silence.

“Please leave. We don’t let just anyone in.”

Xie Qingcheng’s face was pale. He coughed lightly and said nothing.

He wasn’t surprised. For whatever reason, he had done it anyway, even though he knew he would be rejected. And he received a clear, cruel answer.

As he left, he heard the security guard talking with his coworkers behind him. “How weird. What kind of boss would drink something a stranger gave him…”

“Yeah, and the man said they know each other… How would Mr. He even know him? Has this guy gone crazy from trying to climb the ladder?”

“He looks like he’s half blind. Didn’t you notice? One of his eyes doesn’t focus…”

As he left, Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes and straightened his posture. He knew nobody would care, but this was He Yu’s territory. There was the tiniest chance that He Yu might see him, and he didn’t want to look too old and weary in front of him.

He cared about He Yu a lot, but He Yu no longer considered him someone worth meeting alone. Even his appearance would annoy him. Even though he wanted to apologize to him in person, wanted He Yu to stop associating himself with Duan Wen, he knew that He Yu wouldn’t care.

Xie Qingcheng knew that the only thing he could do for him was stop pestering him.

He Yu had been miserable when they were together. Now that He Yu was over him, his coldness was clear from his actions, and he refused to accept his apologies or concern.

With a shred of warmth in his heart and what little life he still had in him, Xie Qingcheng had been smashing his damaged body into a brick wall again and again. Now, battered and bruised, he finally realized that the young man who’d returned must be silently saying, “Go. You should give me a new life…one that has nothing to do with the past.”

Time had passed, and things had changed; Xie Qingcheng didn’t even have the right to see him, let alone talk about that former love.

An unexpected incident happened at the end of the year.

A friend of the Wei family held a small party at their new luxury villa hotel. As close associates, the Wei family was invited, including Xie Qingcheng. He’d never had any interest in these sorts of things when he was healthy; and now that his health was poor, he was even less inclined to

muster up the effort. In the end, though, Xie Xue and Auntie Li managed to persuade him that he shouldn’t stay home all day and that it was important to go out and have fun sometimes.

Only then did Xie Qingcheng agree to go.

At least a thousand people attended, and everyone received a hotel VIP card. Everyone was there to relax—and, more importantly, to support the family and network for valuable future connections. The spacious, exquisitely decorated banquet hall was in the owner’s area. There were three floors total: the banquet hall on the first floor, recreation rooms and lounges on the second floor, and some luxurious private rooms for guests to talk business on the third floor.

People gathered in groups of two or three, chatting and laughing warmly and politely, each with their own goals.

Xie Qingcheng wasn’t eager to make conversation with strangers, and he ended up taking care of Yaya for Wei Dongheng and Xie Xue.

Yaya was well-behaved, a rare angelic baby, but that might just have been because she really loved Xie Qingcheng. As soon as she was in his arms, she would rest obediently against her uncle’s chest, her little hands around his neck as she quietly looked around. When she grew tired, she would snuggle up to her uncle and fall asleep. Taking care of her didn’t tire Xie Qingcheng out at all.

The music in the hall was too loud, and Yaya’s little feet shifted restlessly against Xie Qingcheng. Noticing her discomfort, he lowered his lashes to look down at her. “Are you sleepy?”

“Mm…and hungry,” Yaya murmured softly, yawning. “Unco, I want to drink milk and sleep…”

“Your mom was in a hurry, so she didn’t bring any,” he told her. Despite his stern masculine aura, he had plenty of patience for a baby. “Uncle will bring you upstairs for a nap, all right?”

“Mm…okay…” she said, fighting to keep her eyes open.

Patting her lightly on the back, Xie Qingcheng took her to a room on the third floor to rest.

Murmuring soft comforts to the child as he carried her upstairs, he turned a corner into a hallway only to bump into five or six men who had just finished a business talk.

He went still—for a moment, it felt like he'd been stabbed in the heart by an invisible sword. He almost couldn't breathe.

He hadn't thought He Yu would be here, too.

He Yu was in the midst of the group; the men around him were obviously trying to flatter him, faces plastered with ingratiating smiles.

"That's right, while Executive He was in Australia, he must have—"

Suddenly, He Yu stopped. His gaze swung across the thickly carpeted hallway to land on Xie Qingcheng. In that moment, his expression froze, and time and space seemed to grind to a halt. To think that they would meet here. So unexpectedly, and so directly.

Neither of them could pretend that they didn't see each other or didn't know each other.

In an instant, everyone else disappeared, and it was as if no time had passed at all. As if Xie Qingcheng were still thirty-three, and He Yu were a student of only twenty.

They stared at each other.

A nearby guest noticed and hurried to interject. "Ah, Mr. He, this is an old acquaintance of yours, isn't it…"

And like a stone crashing through the surface of a frozen lake, the sound of his voice broke the dreamlike haze.

He Yu came back to his senses, and pulled his gaze back slightly, making it harder to read his expression. He smiled. "If it weren't for Executive Zhang's reminder, I almost wouldn't have recognized him," he said. "How rude of me."

He slowly walked up to Xie Qingcheng, standing a little closer than was strictly socially acceptable. He reached a hand out, his smile suddenly turning amiable. "Long time no see, Mr. Xie."

A greeting that didn't mention the messages or the rejected visit. That simple "Mr. Xie" cemented their relationship in this unexpected reunion.

Xie Qingcheng didn’t take his hand immediately—it was difficult, when he was holding Yaya. He looked up at He Yu with his peach blossom eyes, calm on the surface but with myriad suppressed emotions below. One eye was bright, but the other could no longer gather light.

He Yu was still holding his hand out politely.

But that was it.

Trying his best to gather himself, slightly adjusting his posture, Xie Qingcheng finally freed one hand; but as soon as he touched He Yu’s fingertips, the sleeping child in his arms woke up and lightly kicked her little legs.

“Mm… Un…co…” She was half asleep, barely coherent. She rubbed her eyes with her little fists and mumbled, “Want Mommy…want milk…”

Worried that she would wriggle so much that she’d fall, he took his hand back to support her with it. “My apologies,” he said to He Yu, adjusting his hold.

There was a pause and a slight smile from He Yu. His expression was unreadable. He withdrew his hand, his gaze shifting between Xie Qingcheng and Yaya for a moment. “Is this your daughter?” he asked.

“My niece.”

“Oh.” He Yu paused and smiled again.

Given the current state of their relationship, Xie Qingcheng had no reason to explain anything to He Yu. But he gave a straightforward answer anyway, for some reason.

“I’m sorry,” He Yu said softly. “I thought you remarried, so…” He trailed off with another empty smile.

The other men didn’t get any closer to their conversation, so Xie Qingcheng was the only one who heard He Yu’s words. Yaya still sat in his arms, warm, so warm that it felt like she could melt the ice in his heart. He stared at He Yu with his unfocused eyes, and did his best to face him as calmly as possible.

After a long beat, with an air of nonchalance, He Yu finished the question. “Are you still not married, Mr. Xie?”

“…No.”

It was much too personal a question, inappropriate to ask the kind of distant acquaintance he was making Xie Qingcheng out to be. But He Yu asked it anyway. Faintly, Xie Qingcheng could feel his heart warming, and found himself developing an expectation that he didn’t want to admit.

But He Yu’s next words were a cold slap in the face.

“What a shame,” he said, smiling. “You should hurry up, at your age. If you wait any longer, you won’t be able to find a good wife.”

Xie Qingcheng stared at him. He Yu responded with a gentle gaze, as that hint of warmth in Xie Qingcheng’s heart cooled off again—not just cool, but so icy as to almost penetrate his bones.

After a long silence, Xie Qingcheng said, “Marriage has nothing to do with age.”

“I know, but you don’t look very well. It’s better to have someone to take care of you when you get older… But that’s up to you, Mr. Xie. Just consider this idle conversation.”

He stared at He Yu in silence. Time crawled by.

Then, out of nowhere, He Yu stared at him and said, “Oh, right…”

“Hmm?”

“I heard someone mention it before, but I wasn’t sure. Mr. Xie, is your eye…”

“It’s blind.”

“…Why?”

With everyone’s eyes on him, Xie Qingcheng didn’t say anything for a moment. Then: “I forget.”

The conversation died again.

“Mr. He,” a guest behind them asked hesitantly, “would you like to chat with Mr. Xie for a bit longer? Should we go downstairs first?”

“…No need.” He Yu gave them an immediate small smile, and in a warm, calm voice, added, “We have nothing more to talk about. I’ll come

with you guys.” He nodded at Xie Qingcheng. “Mr. Xie, it was nice to see you again.”

And then he left.

Xie Qingcheng stood there for a while—never had he imagined that their reunion would be like this. He Yu didn’t blame him directly, or bring up past events, as if everything that happened had just blown away like smoke over the sea. But—

“Uncle…” The warm little girl in his arms shifted again, lifting her head to look at him with sincere concern. “Uncle…why are you sad? Don’t be sad, okay?”

“…Uncle’s not sad,” he replied. “Let’s go. I’ll take you to nap upstairs.”

Yaya raised her hand to touch the rim of his beautiful eye that could no longer see. There was no moisture, and it would never bleed again. But Yaya gently touched his trembling eyelid and said, “Uncle, it’s okay… Don’t cry.”

The private rooms were comfortable. Xie Qingcheng found the one with the best view and sat down, all without saying a single word.

He finally saw He Yu, but it was nothing like he expected. He Yu had spoken gently, but every word was like a dagger to the heart.

Yaya was considerate; when her uncle didn’t say anything, she didn’t make a fuss. Instead, she clumsily patted his forehead as if she wanted to comfort him. After another ten minutes, she fell asleep again. A sudden wave of exhaustion washed over Xie Qingcheng, too.

He leaned back in the recliner, still holding Yaya, and rested for a while.

Perhaps because there was so much pain in his heart that it was exhausted by each passing beat, that rest became a deep sleep. He had a vague dream, in which He Yu came upstairs and found their room.

After staring at him for a long time from beside the recliner, He Yu lowered his head, gently picked Yaya up in his arms, and placed her on the spacious bed. Moving back to Xie Qingcheng, he observed him for a

moment, then placed one hand on the disheveled shirt covering his chest, right over his heart.

“I can’t help but hate you for being so heartless. Xie Qingcheng… I can’t help but hate you.”

But a trembling kiss followed, planted between his eyebrows. It lingered a while… A long time.

It was a good dream. Even as he said he hated him, he was still willing to come back, willing to give him a kiss.

Xie Qingcheng felt something bitter in his throat, like swallowing olives. He couldn’t say anything, though he wanted to call He Yu’s name. All he could do was make a vague, broken sound in a low voice that died away in the silent room…

When he woke up, his phone showed that it was already one in the morning.

His phone was on silent and there were five missed calls, all from Xie Xue and Wei Dongheng. They’d left a message saying that even though they couldn’t reach him they had to return home, so they asked Xie Qingcheng to call them as soon as he saw the message.

Xie Qingcheng moved his arm, which didn’t feel especially sore—he must have slept in a comfortable position. Yaya still lay in his arms; the dream was, in the end, just a dream.

“Uncle, are we going home?”

“Mm.”

“Mkay…too sleepy… Bath at home…” Yaya yawned and snuggled up to Xie Qingcheng. They went downstairs, where some guests were still toasting and chatting. He found the host, said goodbye, and contacted Xie Xue, letting her know that he would be back soon. He exited the hotel into the parking lot.

The host had drivers prepared, but right now was the busiest hour for individual travelers, so there was a shortage of cars. They had to wait a little longer.

“Are you tired?” Xie Qingcheng asked Yaya. She shook her head like a big girl, but gave a big yawn.

They were in a remote area and it was late, so there weren't many cabs about. Xie Qingcheng was wondering what he should do when a brand spanking new Cullinan slowed down and stopped in front of them.

As the window lowered, he was surprised to see He Yu's well-defined face appear.

"What a coincidence," He Yu said. "We meet again."

Xie Qingcheng stared.

"You'll be waiting fifteen minutes to get a driver," he said. When Xie Qingcheng didn't respond, the young man lifted his lashes and said with no discernible emotion, "Mr. Xie, if you don't mind, get in. I'll drop you off."

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Chapter 196:
You Were Replaced

NO MATTER HOW fancy they were, there was a particular leather smell all new cars had in common that irritated the nose.

Xie Qingcheng sat in the passenger seat, holding Yaya—He Yu's car had no child seat. He knew that He Yu was probably working with Duan Wen, and people had repeatedly told him that he shouldn't be alone with He Yu. But he still got into He Yu's car.

It was a quiet ride. He Yu didn't turn on the radio, and he drove steadily, occasionally turning his head to check the rearview mirror.

"When was the last time you were in my car, Mr. Xie?"

"He Yu, these past few years…"

They started speaking at the same time. The words crashed into each other like waves, and they both fell silent, undercurrents and whirlpools still moving below the surface.

"…Are you doing well?" Xie Qingcheng asked at last.

He Yu smiled mechanically. "Me? I'm doing much better than before."

"…That's good."

"I have a new life. What about you, Mr. Xie?" He Yu immediately regretted saying it; that made him sound like he was eager to prove something to Xie Qingcheng.

But fortunately Xie Qingcheng was too distracted to notice the momentary slip. He thought to himself, *I don't know how much time I have left, but He Yu doesn't need to know that.*

"I'm back in China to help Xie Xue take care of her child," he said.

"You were abroad before?"

"In the United States."

“When?”

“…After you left.”

Streetlamps swept light and shadow across He Yu’s handsome, statuesque face. He stared forward in silence for a bit before his smile returned and he asked, “Back then, did you think there was no way I could survive? That I couldn’t be saved from that wreck?”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t answer.

Since he learned of He Yu’s death, he’d lived in constant guilt, always hoping for some kind of miracle. Sometimes when he looked at He Yu’s chat box, he even had the sense that He Yu wasn’t dead, that he would see it if a message was sent.

But He Yu wouldn’t believe that. So Xie Qingcheng didn’t mention it.

He Yu slowed down to stop at a red light. When it turned green, he broke the silence again. “I’m a little curious. Considering our previous relationship, and our bad blood…holding a child in my car like this…” Another smile. “Aren’t you afraid something will happen?”

This time Xie Qingcheng’s reply was swift. “You’ve never thought of harming me.”

He Yu sank into the silence for a while. “When did you develop such confidence in me?”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t answer immediately. But when he noticed that Yaya had fallen asleep again, he said, “Because of the First Emperor.”

He Yu rested one arm on the windowsill, the other on the steering wheel. He turned slightly to glance at Xie Qingcheng.

“Besides me, Lao-Qin, and the director,” added Xie Qingcheng, “you are the only one who knows that the First Emperor is a real person and not just data.”

There was no response from He Yu.

“He Yu, I don’t know if you’ve really changed so much that you’re really working for Duan Wen, but in the past two years, no one has disrupted my life. That means you didn’t tell Duan Wen about my secret—

that I am the First Emperor," said Xie Qingcheng. "You may hate me, but you didn't choose to hurt me."

He Yu's slender fingers tapped gently on the smooth window. "… You're wrong, Xie Qingcheng. I don't hate you." The young man's smile was beautiful—he was in his prime and extremely handsome. The slightest curve of his mouth was bewitching. He stared at Xie Qingcheng's eyes, shining in two different tones, and slowly said, "I am just…very disappointed in you."

Silence.

"It takes energy to hate someone, and I don't feel anything toward you now. I don't hate you, Mr. Xie, since you're not worth wasting my emotions on. I'm doing well now. You had it right before—I'm only in my twenties, with a long life ahead of me. I don't need to waste it on you." There was that bewitching curve of the lips, and a faint scent of cologne emanated from his exquisite button-up. "Thanks to everything you taught me, I've woken up. Looking back on my actions now, it's all like an idiotic joke."

Xie Qingcheng listened quietly to He Yu's sharp words. He always maintained his composure, and wouldn't let that fall just because of some harsh words.

Besides, he loved him.

The man he loved paused for a few seconds and then continued, "As for the First Emperor—I haven't told anyone, yes. But don't be so self-absorbed, Mr. Xie. I haven't mentioned it because I have my own plans. For such priceless information…what could I get in exchange?"

His eyes looked Xie Qingcheng up and down. "The First Emperor may be useful one day. Telling people about it would be foolish. The way I see it…" He chuckled. "I ought to keep it to myself and wait for the right time, then enjoy it all by myself."

There was nothing to say to that.

"Mr. Xie, you didn't think I would just obey Duan Wen, did you?"

The light changed, and the car started again.

An immense weight bore down on Xie Qingcheng's chest. He leaned against the expensively upholstered leather seat and stared at the road ahead. "So you really are on the same side as Duan Wen."

"This car has a video and audio jamming system," He Yu said. "You are the only one who will hear what I've said today. You won't be able to collect evidence and sell me to the police again, so… So what if I am?"

Xie Qingcheng's heart was cold as an ice cellar. "He Yu, you know what kind of person Duan Wen is. He used Huang Zhilong and Wei Rong, and once he got everything he could out of them, he started looking for his next pawn. He's committed countless evils…and you're conspiring with him? His hands are covered in blood—including the blood of your own mother."

"The old He Yu wouldn't have been willing to." The car turned a corner, following the GPS. They were almost at their destination. As he slowed down, He Yu continued, "But the old He Yu is dead." He smiled at Xie Qingcheng. "That past He Yu was killed by the person he trusted most. He chose to protect someone else instead of me."

The car stopped. He Yu opened the door and gestured at Xie Qingcheng to get out. "We've arrived, Mr. Xie. It should be convenient for you to get off here."

Turning around to look at him, Xie Qingcheng wanted to tell He Yu, *Back then, I wasn't looking for you because I wanted to save Chen Man, but because I didn't want you to go astray.*

But no matter what he said, it would just sound like meaningless quibble to He Yu, who claimed that Xie Qingcheng didn't mean anything to him now; that he wasn't even worthy of even hating. Xie Qingcheng didn't know what else he could say to him.

He Yu was already raising his dark eyebrows. "What, Mr. Xie? Do you need me to take you to the parking garage?"

"No need." Xie Qingcheng got out of the car and stood outside. When the door was just about to close, he said, "He Yu."

He looked up at him.

“If you didn’t care about me at all, why did that incident cause you to join Duan Wen’s side?”

He Yu’s expression darkened slightly.

“And as for the naval battle, I’m very sorry.”

He didn’t reply.

“After I found out you were alive, I’ve been wanting to say this to you—but you didn’t respond to the message I sent. I went looking for you at your company, but you wouldn’t see me. I thought you didn’t want to contact me anymore. Now that I finally have the chance to, I still want to apologize to you. He Yu, I don’t want you to be like this. I saw the letter you left in your villa. I know that Duan Wen implanted a chip into your heart preventing you from revealing his secrets, which is why you couldn’t say anything specific while you were at sea. I know it all. And I know how disappointed you are in me.”

He paused, and his blind and seeing eyes looked into He Yu’s. “…He Yu, is that chip still there?” His voice revealed a hint of sadness and concern that he couldn’t hide—weak emotions that had never belonged to Xie Qingcheng.

All was quiet.

He Yu didn’t answer. He lowered his gaze and stared up at Xie Qingcheng’s face, at his blind eye, at the strand of gleaming white hair at his temple, and at that face that looked especially pale in the darkness.

There seemed to be a sliver of emotion on He Yu’s face.

But suddenly, his cell phone rang, and the delicate atmosphere was shattered.

“…Hello.” He came back to his senses as he picked up the phone. A man’s voice came from it; standing at a distance, Xie Qingcheng couldn’t hear clearly, but the voice sounded familiar.

“…All right,” He Yu said, after speaking briefly with the man. “I’ll be back on time.”

The call ended.

He lifted his gaze again, his eyes once again gleaming with cold light. “Sorry. That was my personal physician.”

Silence.

“He’s treating my condition well,” He Yu said. “Much better than you did—including helping with the chip, that’s now been removed. Thank you for your belated concern.”

Xie Qingcheng had nothing to say in response.

“Actually, now that I’ve gotten over you, in retrospect, there are plenty of better choices. I was so young then, I couldn’t see things clearly. There were so many alternatives, but I insisted on you. It seems so childish now.” After a pause, he continued, “Oh right, I have a new WeChat account. I thought my previous one was ridiculous, so I stopped logging in.” When Xie Qingcheng said nothing, he asked, “Do you want to add my new one?”

Xie Qingcheng lowered his lashes. “…No need.”

He Yu maintained that slight smile as if it was tattooed on his face. “Don’t worry, I won’t bother you. I’m sick of you already.”

He was cruel, and Xie Qingcheng’s weak emotions disappeared beneath his ridicule. The man pushing forty stood upright. He was disabled, old, exhausted, and looked like a withered tree, but he still had his self-respect. He was as dispassionate as ever, as if deprived of the breath of life.

“Mm. I know,” he said.

He Yu was silent.

“But I’ve already said everything I wanted to say, and everything I can say. You don’t want to hear anything else from me, so there’s no need. And I’ve always had your old account added in my phone, so adding another one would feel strange.”

The silence continued.

“Thank you for dropping me off despite our past grudges, He Yu. You can go back now.”

He turned around, Yaya in his arms, and walked into the gated community alone.

Watching his receding figure, He Yu couldn’t hold back anymore. A myriad of emotions surged through his heart—painful yet lingering, disgusted yet obsessed…

It had been three years. For a variety of reasons, he had barely been able to get any news about Xie Qingcheng in Australia. He’d tried his best to sever their relationship. He had been hurt so deeply he wanted to give up on him for good.

But…

He Yu licked his lips with the tip of his red tongue, his hand gently moving to the passenger seat where Xie Qingcheng had sat and stroking it, as if he wanted to grasp the skin and flesh of the man who just left… His insane, obscene energy only got worse.

He watched Xie Qingcheng walk away until the man completely disappeared. Then he closed the tinted window, leaned back against his seat, and retracted his idle hand. Xie Qingcheng’s residual warmth and scent seemed to linger on his palm. He Yu closed his eyes, and the warmth wrapped around him, spreading to his heart…

Through the Cullinan’s sunroof, he saw a shooting star streak across the starry sky, an illusory sign of a heated tryst that took place on a rainy night many years ago. In the dead silence, He Yu let out a low, wounded noise. He opened his eyes, full of madness, tortured by himself.

“Xie Qingcheng…” His voice was as light as the hum of a mosquito, but his heart trembled. “Xie Qingcheng… Why can’t I just…hate you?”

Meanwhile, Xie Qingcheng returned to the Wei household, settled Yaya down, and ran a bath in the bathroom of the guest room where he usually stayed.

He lay in the tub, thinking through their conversation. He had a lot he wanted to say to He Yu, but Xie Qingcheng knew that his words would sound meaningless and would only disgust him; he didn’t have to justify himself.

After all, He Yu didn’t even want to spend energy on hating him.

Xie Qingcheng fell asleep feeling sickly, thinking about the look on He Yu’s face as he said those words. Entrenched in an emotion akin to

sadness, his body felt terribly cold, as if all the warmth in his chest had dissipated.

The little Charmander still stood on his nightstand. He'd brought it from China all the way across the ocean, and now it had accompanied him back from New York to his bedroom in Huzhou. But now the person who gave it to him would never smile and ask, "Are you cold? I'll warm you up."

Opening his WeChat, Xie Qingcheng found He Yu's contact box without needing to scroll. He'd had it pinned to the top of his contacts for more than two years now.

He stared at it for a long time. Then, slowly, as if possessed, his hand moved to the voice record button.

"He Yu…"

Silence.

One second passed. Then two, then three.

Softly, he said, "Little Devil…won't you come back?"

His finger released the record button, but he didn't send it. His hand trembled as he swiped up to cancel the message. He Yu's nickname on his WeChat was still "Little Devil," but he couldn't find his little devil anymore.

Xie Qingcheng put his phone to his chest and slowly closed his eyes.

He'd thought they would never have the chance to meet again.

Xie Qingcheng wanted to stop He Yu, but he couldn't do it. He Yu had a completely different life now. He had new ideas, new goals, a new personal physician… Xie Qingcheng didn't have the right to ask him anything. The only thing he could do was to wait and see if the Dreambreakers made any significant progress. If there was anything he could do, he would fight for He Yu. He would keep an eye on the organization, and try to prevent He Yu from making any more mistakes.

He Yu was an intelligent man. He'd handled everything perfectly—except for admitting that he worked with Duan Wen in front of Xie

Qingcheng. But there was no concrete proof that he was part of Mandela.

With no evidence, trying to interrogate or suppress He Yu would be an empty gesture. He even had the honor of having gone undercover for the police before, and organizations who didn't know any better were practically falling over themselves to praise him. The spotlight fell off of him for a bit, though, as he became busy meeting with business partners of all sizes.

It was at a year-end medical summit held in Huzhou that Xie Qingcheng ran into him again.

He Yu was a special guest invited by the organizer, so he sat in the front row. Xie Qingcheng saw him as soon as he entered, but was surprised to see someone next to him—a handsome man in a double-breasted suit, with soft eyes and a lightly cunning gaze. He walked with He Yu, smiling and turning his head to talk to him, intimate and natural. When he sat down, he glanced toward the back of the room, and Xie Qingcheng caught sight of a pair of peach blossom eyes very similar to his own.

Realization struck him like thunder.

It was him?!

Xie Qingcheng's head buzzed. He hadn't seen the man in years, but he would never forget him. Why was he with He Yu?!

The shock left Xie Qingcheng distracted during the summit; he could barely listen to the speakers. When it ended, he made his way over to He Yu.

He Yu was about to pack and leave when he caught a glimpse of Xie Qingcheng out of the corner of his eye. He paused, straightened up, and smiled politely. "Doctor Xie. You're here as well?"

The man with peach blossom eyes turned his head away from the people he was chatting with to look at them. Xie Qingcheng met his gaze, and their expressions both subtly darkened.

"Oh, let me introduce you. This is my personal doctor, Anthony."

A strange expression crossed Xie Qingcheng's face. "Anthony?"

Anthony looked at him with a smile, surreptitiously stepping closer to He Yu. He extended his hand to Xie Qingcheng. "Long time no see."

Xie Qingcheng was silent.

He Yu didn’t seem surprised at all—it looked like he already knew how they knew each other. When Xie Qingcheng didn’t move, He Yu smiled and said, “Doctor Xie, you should know him, even if you two haven’t seen each other in over a decade.”

Anthony narrowed his eyes and smiled in turn. “That’s right. We haven’t contacted each other in a decade, but I still remember perfectly well what happened in the past. Don’t tell me you forgot about me; see, I still remember what you looked like back then—very handsome, unlike now.”

His smile became gentle, but felt more dangerous. “You look like you’re in your forties. Time ages us all, doesn’t it?” His beautiful, glass-like peach blossom eyes bore into Xie Qingcheng’s half blind ones. That dangerous smile deepened across his much younger face, as he said, enunciating each syllable, “Cousin?”

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Chapter 197:
The Protected Becomes Someone Else

XIE QINGCHENG'S FACE TENSED, his back ramrod straight. He couldn't allow the other man's clear, malicious sarcasm to make him back off or feel inferior.

He was silent for a moment, then spoke Anthony's real name one slow syllable at a time. "Xie Lishen."

Anthony smiled at the sound of the name he'd been separated from for a long time. "I don't like that name, cousin. Please call me Anthony instead."

Suppressing his rage, Xie Qingcheng looked down at Anthony. They were a similar height, but when Xie Qingcheng stood in front of him, he seemed to oppress Anthony, as if gazing down at him from a lofty height. Even if he was old, weak, and blind in one eye, that feeling hadn't changed.

He glanced at He Yu before turning his focus to Anthony. "You've been treating him this whole time?" he asked straightforwardly.

"That's right."

"…I need to talk to you."

Anthony paused for a second, then grinned. "Come on, cousin, why are you being like that? It's not polite at all." Then to He Yu, he said, "Well, Executive He, may I talk to him for a bit?"

He Yu met his eyes for a few seconds, unblinking. "…Okay." His lips barely moved. "But we have business later, so keep an eye on the time."

"I will. Don't worry," Anthony replied gently. And to Xie Qingcheng he said, "Let's go, cousin."

He Yu watched their receding backs with a slight frown.

At a twenty-four-hour café outside the summit venue, the cousins sat down in a rather private corner.

“What do you want to drink? Latte? Espresso?” Anthony’s slender fingers flipped through the menu. “Or since you’re so old-fashioned, maybe a pot of tea would be better. How about a pot of Fenghuang Dancong?”

“Whatever you want.”

Anthony ordered a pot of tea and a caramel macchiato. “You really have fallen so far,” he said, folding his hands on the table and smiling at Xie Qingcheng. “Don’t you think you ought to change the way you…y’know?”

“The way I talk?”

Narrowing his eyes, Anthony leaned forward slightly. “The way you talk—it makes people…very uncomfortable.”

“This is just how I speak. If you can’t get used to it, deal with it.”

Anthony leaned back again, lowered his eyelashes, and widened his smile. “We haven’t seen each other in so long. I’m so sad that you’re speaking to me in such a tone when we’ve only just met again.”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t want to beat around the bush. “Xie Lishen, are you working for Duan Wen? Have you been in charge of He Yu as his personal doctor?”

“That first question is so sharp! If I don’t answer it properly, I’ll go to jail. Cousin, why are you so ruthless?” Anthony set his elbow on the back of his chair as he stared at Xie Qingcheng, apparently pleased with himself. “I’m just a doctor. My business is treating and saving patients—I don’t partake in anything else, and I don’t know anything. I’ve never done anything against the law or the will of heaven.”

His gaze swept over the phone that Xie Qingcheng placed on the table. His answer was sound. Even if Xie Qingcheng was on the line with someone at the police station, Anthony had ensured that no evidence recorded could be used against him.

The drinks were brought over. Anthony’s expression brightened as he took a sip. “As for your second question, cousin, yes. I said earlier that I am He Yu’s personal doctor. Actually, four years ago, when he was still with you, I was already his personal doctor back then. Did you not know?”

There was nothing to say in response.

“Oh, that’s right.” He laughed again. “I’m not a very public guy, and I’m using a different name now. He Yu didn’t know who I was at the time, so it’s only natural that he didn’t tell you. Besides, he was so obsessed with you back then, he definitely wouldn’t have told you that his family found a new personal doctor for him. It makes sense that you didn’t know.”

Xie Qingcheng’s expression was dark, his eyes piercing through his silver-rimmed glasses. “Xie Lishen, what exactly do you want?”

“Call me Anthony, cousin. I told you I prefer Anthony.”

“What you like isn’t my problem.” Xie Qingcheng’s voice was cold.

For a moment, Anthony was silent. “Cousin, that mouth of yours… deserves a beating. You’ve fallen so far and you’re still so full of yourself. A true gentleman knows when to bend his head and when to hold his head high. Shouldn’t someone as smart as you understand that, after thirty-some years?”

“You have no right to teach me how to act, Xie Lishen.”

Anthony’s smile faded, his peach blossom eyes growing darker as he looked at Xie Qingcheng. “Do you have to call me by that name?”

“Yes. I’m afraid that in my eyes, you will always be the same as you were back then.”

The last trace of Anthony’s smile disappeared from his face. He lowered his voice and leaned as close to Xie Qingcheng as he could across the table. The malice that suddenly appeared on his face was enough to make anyone shudder—but not Xie Qingcheng.

“Xie Qingcheng, did you know?” he whispered. “You’re loathsome, and you deserve to be so alone. No wonder your ex-wife betrayed you and your ex-boyfriend hates you so much. You’re a beast. Only someone like Xie Xue, without a shred of temper, could tolerate you for thirty years.”

Xie Qingcheng took the insults without showing a ripple of emotion. He was plenty aware of his character defects. He didn’t need Xie Lishen to tell him. He just stared at Anthony and asked, “Why do you want to get close to He Yu?”

“Isn’t that obvious?” Anthony sneered, leaning back again. He took out a pack of cigarettes, the same brand as Xie Qingcheng’s, and dangled

one from his lips. Lighting it with a click, he said, “I’m a doctor, and he’s a patient. I’m treating him. I replaced you. It’s that simple.”

No response.

“You can’t stop him from finding a better doctor after you quit.”

“Where did you get your medical education?”

“Overseas. I don’t need to show you my medical license, right? As long as He Yu is satisfied, that’s enough. He’s my employer, after all.”

Xie Qingcheng knew very well what kind of man Xie Lishen was. He stared at him, cold and unblinking. “Your goal isn’t to treat him. You can hide it from others, but not from me.”

“Hah. For a half-blind man, you see things quite clearly,” Anthony said. He spread his hands in mockery and laughed. “Yes, my goal isn’t to treat him. But it is simple, and I didn’t break the law, or harm a soul. I even stayed with him in Australia during the two most difficult years of his life, helping him out of his deep madness and grief. Along the way, he and I… We…”

Like a snake poking its head out of a cave, flicking its forked tongue.

Meeting Xie Qingcheng’s gaze without blinking, unwilling to miss a single expression on his face, he suddenly bared his fangs and bit him.

“We slept together.”

Xie Qingcheng was silent.

“I like him, and I find him interesting. Is that not allowed?” Anthony stared at Xie Qingcheng. “At first, I was only hired to treat him and help with his psychological problems. I found him quite handsome and affectionate, and he made a good impression. He could hurt himself so much for a beast like you… Where else would you find such a good lover these days?”

A blank stare was all Xie Qingcheng gave him in response. He could think of a thousand other strange reasons why Xie Lishen would approach He Yu…but this one caught him off guard.

Anthony studied the glow in Xie Qingcheng’s eyes, his hatred and joy multiplying infinitely at the emotions he saw there. “You know, he was

seriously injured, but the psychological trauma was even worse. When I saw him at a private hospital in Australia, he had almost completely lost his mind.

“I spent a long time taking care of him—the amount of patience I spent on him was no less than you did back then… No, to be precise, I spent much more effort than you ever did. You know what it’s like when a psychological Ebola patient loses control. We tried medicine, hypnosis, sedation…but those methods are only effective in the short term. He needed a comfort that could sink deep into his heart. He needed something else, or someone else, to mend the hole you punctured.

“I’ll admit, he truly loved you at the time. Even as you hurt him in your pursuit of justice, he was still thinking of you in his confusion. I felt sorry for him, distressed… I told him that I would always be by his side, and I comforted him tirelessly over and over again. Once, during a flare-up, perhaps because I resemble you…he got the wrong person.”

He looked at Xie Qingcheng calmly. “I don’t mind having sex. I liked him anyway, so we did what you two used to do. It was as if he sank into a frenzied, beautiful memory, indulging in a fantasy. I was curious how a man as straight as you, with such a…traditional personality, could break your own restraints and sleep with a young man like him… But after that unforgettable day with him in the hospital room, well…I get it. You have no idea how lucky you were, Xie Qingcheng. The He Yu you lost is such a perfect lover.

“We’ve been doing it almost every night for the past two years. It’s its own form of treatment. It makes me happy to see him relax into that kind of relationship, so we’re not just a doctor and a patient—we’re also dating. And now that I’ve told you everything, you should feel better, right?” He smiled. “No matter how cruel I am, I wouldn’t hurt my own boyfriend. We’re very much in love.”

Xie Qingcheng stayed quiet.

“I have to thank you, cousin. If you hadn’t been so ungrateful, if you hadn’t broken his heart so thoroughly, he never would have fallen for anyone else in his life.” Anthony took a sip of his drink, his pale fingers curving around the handle. “I must thank you for your indifference; now I can have such a perfect man to myself.”

As Xie Qingcheng reached his ice-cold hand to touch his cup, the heat from the tea seeped into his palm. “…Xie Lishen,” he said, through cold, thin, bloodless lips, “I’m not interested in hearing about your private life.” Xie Qingcheng had a splitting headache, but he forced himself to stay calm. “But I’m warning you. He’s a patient, not someone you can play with to get revenge against me. Do you know how immoral you’re being right now?”

“What are you talking about, cousin?” An elegant smile. “*I’m* immoral? Who was the first one to mix his private life with his patient’s? Was it me? How pathetic were you with him, crying and begging him to hold you like a shameless woman? He told me everything, you know. And you still have the gall to lecture me?”

Teeth slightly clenched, Xie Qingcheng finally showed an ugly expression. He looked as if he’d just been stabbed.

“Besides, you’re not me,” Anthony added leisurely. “What right do you have to say that I’m playing with him? My feelings for him are sincere, cousin.”

Xie Qingcheng looked at him, face dark. “Sincere?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve never seen someone sincere talk about his private life in front of outsiders like this. You don’t respect him at all, Xie Lishen.”

“…Don’t make me laugh, cousin. These are modern times. What’s the issue with talking about it?” Anthony asked. “Or do you not want to listen?”

He didn’t respond.

“You must feel awful, cousin. As if something of yours was taken away and you’ll never get it back. Your face is turning green, you’re so upset! Even though you’re sick. Be careful, it’ll shorten your lifespan.”

Enunciating clearly, Xie Qingcheng said, “My lifespan has nothing to do with you, and you don’t need to worry about it. But mark my words, Xie Lishen. If you’re working for Duan Wen and using He Yu, I’ll make you pay.”

Anthony was silent for a moment, then smiled. “Xie Qingcheng, how conceited are you? How capable do you think you are? You’re a dying dragon. You can’t even raise your hands, much less soar into the sky. You’ll make me pay? How laughable.”

Even Xie Qingcheng’s eyebrows seemed to have a layer of frost on them. “Try me.”

Under that cold and unwavering gaze, Anthony began to grow uncertain. He stared at Xie Qingcheng’s face, and a few seconds later, his elegant mask of civility suddenly cracked. Years and years of hatred toward Xie Qingcheng suddenly came pouring out. He lunged forward and stared balefully at him. The light in his eyes was filled with a vicious hatred.

“How can a cripple be so confident?” he said in a low voice. “You’re ridiculous, Xie Qingcheng! You’re just as disgusting as your pretentious parents—you all think you know the truths of heaven and earth!” To Anthony’s irritation, Xie Qingcheng only regarded him coldly. He became vicious. “Your parents died from their self-righteousness,” he hissed. “If they weren’t always claiming to be so outstanding and virtuous, meddling in things and playing philanthropist, they wouldn’t have gotten involved in Wei Rong’s case! And what happened? They died, smashed into paste! Ha ha, as expected of the vile spawn of those bitches, you deserve it—”

A vicious slap to the face abruptly cut off Anthony’s diatribe. For good measure, Xie Qingcheng stood up and threw the dregs of his tea into his face.

“You—!”

“And this is what you deserved.” Xie Qingcheng looked down at Anthony with a dangerous expression. “The biggest mistake my parents ever made was taking in a bastard like you.”

Other customers in the café were turning to look at them, but Xie Qingcheng ignored them. “Xie Lishen,” he said, slowly and deliberately, “no matter what name you take or what country you go to, it can’t change the fact that you are a bastard. You could have chosen to become an upright person, but you chose the same path as your mother.”

Anthony jumped to his feet, his elegant mask completely shattered. His eyes filled with resentment; even his voice changed. “What did you

say?! How dare you speak to me like that, you—”

“What, am I supposed to be afraid? Because I’m blind? Or because I’m old?” came Xie Qingcheng’s retort. “I’m telling you, Xie Lishen. The last time I saw you, I called you a beast, and this time, I’ll call you a beast again. It’s been more than twenty years, but you haven’t changed at all.”

His words landed like a punch, knocking away the final fragment of Anthony’s mask. His composure vanished as he rushed forward to hit Xie Qingcheng. But Xie Qingcheng was a much better fighter; he dodged the strike and grabbed Xie Lishen’s hand, twisting his arm until he dislocated it from its socket.

Cold sweat poured down Anthony’s pale face.

At that moment, a hand reached out from behind Xie Qingcheng, grabbed his wrist, and forcibly loosened his grip.

“My apologies, Mr. Xie.” When Xie Qingcheng turned around, there was He Yu, looking at him calmly, still holding his tattooed arm. “But I don’t want you to hurt my personal physician.”

Though still in a position to attack, when Xie Qingcheng saw He Yu’s face, familiar yet unfamiliar, his strength seemed to vanish.

He suddenly felt exhausted.

In a seemingly unintentional gesture, He Yu’s fingertips rubbed Xie Qingcheng’s tattoo lightly before he silently released him.

“Thank you for allowing me this small degree of dignity, Mr. Xie.”

Xie Qingcheng adjusted his sleeves quietly, entirely unreadable to everyone around him.

With his clothing straightened, he took a few bills from his wallet, threw them onto the table, and brushed past He Yu with a blank expression.

He didn’t look back.

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Chapter 198:
Yet I Invited You Again

XIE QINGCHENG RETURNED to Moyu Alley and spent a long time just sitting in a daze.

He didn't want to remember what Xie Lishen had said to him. The words kept hurting him, disgusting him, making him feel immensely uncomfortable.

Logically speaking, if He Yu liked someone else, that was something to celebrate. Xie Qingcheng no longer cared about his own feelings or his own discomfort.

But that someone should never be Xie Lishen.

Xie Qingcheng knew all too well what type of person Xie Lishen was.

His gaze swept across the wall, looking at the almost-faded traces of photo frames—more than twenty years ago, it had been covered in pictures, and many of those pictures contained Xie Lishen.

He lit a cigarette, took a drag, and coughed gently. His vision blurred in the scattered smoke, and his thoughts traveled back to many years ago.

Xie Qingcheng's paternal grandfather was a small-time comprador—today, he would have been called a translator.

During that era of poverty, compradors were mostly hired by foreign companies, and so were a bit better off than the average citizen. After he met a bourgeoisie lady at work, they fell in love and married. But it wasn't hard to imagine how a comprador and a capitalist roader would have been treated during the white-flag campaign that came soon after, and the ensuing ten years of chaos.

In the 1970s, his grandmother hanged herself because she couldn't bear the humiliation anymore, and his grandfather never married again. Eventually, once he was no longer under official suspicion, with his two

children in tow, and after much hardship and innovation, he slowly brought his family back to life.

His two sons were Xie Qingcheng's father, Xie Ping, and his elder brother, Xie Qingcheng's uncle.

The boys grew up in a prosperous era of rapid development, when anything was possible. Xie Ping wanted to be a policeman, and though there were some difficulties with his political review, in the end he passed.

Meanwhile his brother, Xie Qingcheng's uncle, followed in their father's footsteps. In the city of Yishi, he peddled and exchanged things, moving from street to street to turn a small profit. Their business grew bigger and bigger, and the former Stinking Old Ninth, one of the despised intellectual class, soon became known as everyone's Boss Xie.

The family thrived. A photo of Xie Qingcheng's grandmother always sat in the hall by his grandfather's picture; the gentle, elegant lady never had a gray hair, and her peach blossom eyes were curved in a smile as she watched the days pass by peacefully and prosperously. Uncle Xie got married, and so did Xie Ping… Surrounded by children and grandchildren, the pain of the past became nothing but a pale scar.

Until that woman showed up.

Uncle Xie's mistress.

Uncle Xie was very different from Xie Ping. Xie Ping was a policeman, with a just mind. He married Zhou Muying in a union of true love, and he never looked at other women. But Uncle Xie was a businessman, surrounded by temptations and with little restraint. Eventually, he couldn't hold himself back.

He spent a little over half a year with his mistress before she suddenly left. He didn't care. After all, it was only business, only fun, so why bother with sincerity?

But to his shock, a year later, as the old man was holding a birthday banquet with the whole family, that same mistress came knocking at the door, asking for money with a child in her arms. It was his, and it was Xie Lishen.

Uncle Xie's wife had an impulsive temper, fiery in both love and hatred. How could she accept such an insult, such betrayal, at a family banquet? In her rage, she killed the mistress a few days later and gave herself up to the police. For the sake of a man who scorned her, she ruined her life.

The incident dealt a huge blow to Grandpa Xie. He had already been in poor health, and after such a shock, he couldn't hold on for much longer. Before he died, the stubborn, upright old man made his will, leaving everything to his second son Xie Ping and nothing to his eldest.

After the old man passed away, Uncle Xie changed. His father had been angry at him for heartlessly betraying his wife; he was angry at his father for cutting him off and not taking his side. Uncle Xie was an alcoholic and a gambler. He would go bother his brother every once in a while, and when he got back to his rental home, would beat and scold Xie Lishen, calling him a sign of bad luck.

Xie Ping couldn't take it. He tried to talk his older brother down a handful of times, but he was always met with spit in his face—

"Talk?! Talk about what? You have a wife and children, living a comfortable life in the house our old man gave you, with his money…but what about me? If you really think of me as a brother, you should give me half of the property! Half of the money!"

Xie Ping was disappointed in his brother. "If I give it to you, you'll only turn around and gamble it away or spend it on women, and then I'd just have to arrest you. If you don't change your ways, ten million, much less one million, wouldn't last you half a year!"

"Bullshit! If you don't want to give it to me, just say so! You've come up with so many lofty justifications since you put on that uniform, Xie Ping. And you want to arrest me? Open your damn eyes! I'm your brother! How many beatings did I bear for you when we were younger? And you want to arrest me? How dare you say that to me!"

He even dragged Xie Lishen over as he cursed his brother out. "See that?" he said to his son, jabbing a finger at Xie Ping. "Huh? That's your uncle! Half of the money they use in their cozy life should be ours! It's all your fault, you devil spawn! You and your bitch of a mother! You made me lose everything! Everything!" As he yelled, he slapped Xie Lishen across

the face. Tears dripped unceasingly from the boy's face as it swelled from the blow.

Xie Ping intervened at once. "What are you doing? This is a matter between us adults—why are you hitting a child?!"

"So what? Go take care of Xie Qingcheng instead! It's not your place to tell me what to do with my kids! The servant of the people sticking his nose into everything—what are you, the police of the Pacific? I'm warning you, keep nagging me, and I'll beat him to death!"

Xie Ping had no choice but to leave.

Before he left, he looked back at Xie Lishen. The child was so young, but his eyes were already filled with hatred. But he couldn't tell where that hatred was directed…

Perhaps the saying "the heavens are watching" really was true. Not long after, Uncle Xie had an accident after a night of drinking and gambling, and fell into the river while he was drunk. It was late at night, and nobody saw. He wasn't found until the next day, when a sand transport boat ran into him—already swollen and lifeless.

After going through the formalities, Xie Ping brought his elder brother's only son home.

"Lishen, treat this as your home now. We'll take good care of you, okay?"

Xie Lishen was still young, but his eyes held a maturity beyond that of most normal children.

"Thank you, Uncle and Auntie," he said politely to Xie Ping and Zhou Muying.

And then he turned to look at Xie Qingcheng. He stared at him for a long time, longer than anyone else.

"…Thank you, cousin."

Xie Qingcheng was a stoic, masculine sort even as a child, so he didn't have a great eye for details. Without noticing Xie Lishen's gaze at all, he nodded to him easily. "Don't be afraid. If you need anything, come to me. We're family."

Xie Lishen smiled a little. “Sure.”

When Xie Qingcheng looked back now, Xie Lishen’s hostility toward him had been there since the start. And as they lived under the same roof, his hostility only increased—in part because Xie Qingcheng was just too obtuse. For example, he never cared about someone’s origin. To him, a person was an individual, and their parents and family had no bearing on that.

So he never avoided such topics around Xie Lishen. When they watched TV, if there was a plot about a mistress having an illegitimate child, he wouldn’t change the channel. He didn’t even realize there was a problem.

He earnestly thought Xie Lishen wasn’t the kind of person who’d mind that sort of thing. He didn’t establish any connection between the plot in the show and Xie Lishen, but Xie Lishen was different. He suspected that Xie Qingcheng was mocking him on purpose.

Xie Lishen saw imaginary enemies wherever he turned, and so no matter what Xie Qingcheng did, it was always wrong. There were ulterior motives behind his every action, either to hurt him or humiliate him. Even if Xie Qingcheng just gave him a casual glance, the sensitive Xie Lishen would figure out some deeper meaning behind it.

He hated Xie Qingcheng, and he was always ascribing some dark purpose to his every word and action to confirm his own biases. If something didn’t happen for any particular reason, he would make one up. Xie Qingcheng wouldn’t argue with him either way.

Sometimes, when people failed to understand each other, it wasn’t because they didn’t have the ability or opportunity. It was because there was no intention to understand in the first place.

So Xie Lishen’s resentment toward Xie Qingcheng became deeper and deeper…most of it growing from his own imagination. He believed that Xie Qingcheng had taken what was his and was deliberately trying to disgust him, and the more he thought about it, the more he hated him.

The best example was at a local performance of a New Year’s stage play.

The organizer of the performance had taken an early liking to Xie Lishen after they'd seen him reading in the garden. They thought he was beautiful, well suited to play the prince in the performance.

Which little boy didn't want to be a prince? Pride was written all over Xie Lishen's joyful face. Xie Ping and his wife were happy for him too, since the child's past wasn't exactly filled with things to be happy about. It was the first time they'd ever seen him jumping up and down in delight, like a little boy his age should. Xie Qingcheng was happy for him, too, and thought he suited the role.

The day of the performance, Xie Lishen did his best…and perfectly embodied the role of an elegant, gentlemanly prince, winning the applause of the audience.

At first, he thought he could win the Best Performer award. The contestants who came after him weren't that good; most children were there for fun and hadn't prepared very hard, some forgetting lines and some out of tune. Xie Lishen was excited—he waited eagerly to go on stage and receive his award.

But at the end of the show, Xie Qingcheng was the one invited up.

He didn't perform a play like his cousin. He sat at a piano, his eyelashes lowered—and in the quiet ray of light, played the theme song of *Cinema Paradiso*. He gently broke the light as it landed on the piano keys, and every note was like a ripple in the summer evening breeze.

When the song ended, Xie Lishen heard someone whisper, "Woah, so beautiful…"

"He's the prince in my heart…"

His face paled instantly.

He had no idea that Xie Qingcheng had only volunteered to play the piano at the end because the organizer was a close classmate who needed his support. He didn't want to know the reason—all he knew was that Xie Qingcheng had stolen his limelight!

An angry red burned in his eyes. When he got home that night, he shrilly asked Xie Qingcheng, "Why did you have to perform? Why did you

do the same thing as I did? Are you trying to mock me?! Are you trying to compete with me? Are you trying to take what's mine?!"

Xie Qingcheng was stunned. "My classmate asked me to… What's up with you?"

What's up with me? He even had the nerve to ask!

If he wasn't dressed like such an elegant little prince, playing the piano so pretentiously, would he have been praised as a "prince"? He must have done it on purpose! He'd done it on purpose and now he was pretending to be clueless! He was so fake it was disgusting!

Xie Lishen gritted his teeth and shut up, but the sight of Xie Qingcheng playing piano tormented him through countless nightmares. When the Xie family fell into poverty and moved out of their high-end neighborhood, they had to sell the piano to raise money for an operation for the sick Zhou Muying—providing Xie Lishen with a burst of happiness.

He looked at Xie Qingcheng's hands that had once danced across the keys, now moving rough wood and cardboard, helping his parents pack things away, wiping the table and washing dishes… The anger that was building in his heart for so many years was finally released.

That was right… Xie Qingcheng's family took away what should have been his normal life.

They took his father's money, and even took him—as if they were his saviors! Xie Qingcheng robbed him of his wealth and took his limelight… but now, the tables had turned. The family was going downhill. He could no longer take expensive piano lessons, could no longer act so noble.

Cousin, you took everything from me. But now, we are the same, Xie Lishen thought joyfully.

As poor as I am.

As miserable as I am.

You're not a noble son, not a prince, just a poor kid from a dilapidated alley. Your parents made a mistake and got demoted… Humiliating, isn't it? Now your parents have fallen, too, so you should feel as ashamed as I did!

You should lower your damn head.

But to his surprise, Xie Qingcheng's mentality never changed at all.

Xie Qingcheng was even more responsible and reasonable than before, and as he hit puberty, he became more and more handsome. After school each day, there was even a group of blushing, chattering girls trailing after him. They followed him all the time, and when he looked up, they ran away, laughing.

The neighbors began to call him "handsome." Xie Lishen was handsome, too, but as long as Xie Qingcheng was there, Xie Qingcheng was the only one they called handsome.

Xie Lishen hated it—he looked upon Xie Qingcheng with loathing, at his gradually broadening shoulders, the pleasing lines of his back, at his lean legs. When he turned around to look up from under the old locust tree, the other boy's eyes seemed to hold the world's most beautiful peach blossoms.

Xie Lishen was so angry that his heart pounded, as if he was afraid of every inch of Xie Qingcheng's light and growth. To him, Xie Qingcheng's every move was an original sin.

Even when Xie Qingcheng left the most delicious food they had for his younger sister and cousin in the family's hardest times, Xie Lishen believed he was still putting on an act, a disguised "charity."

Did he really think he was a prince?

No…no! He was just a thief who stole his life! The whole family were thieves!

When he entered middle school, Xie Lishen finally couldn't bring himself to pretend anymore.

He started to show his rebellious side. He often didn't return home, wasting time outside and causing endless trouble for Xie Ping and his wife. Though they were worried for him, they didn't dare say anything too harsh, because he wasn't their own son. He had always been a relatively delicate child, so instead of scolding him harshly, they tried to educate him sincerely.

But Xie Lishen didn't listen.

That superficial rebelliousness lasted for about half a year, until the school leadership publicly punished Xie Lishen because he was caught dating while he was still in school. And the person he was dating was from the vocational high school next door…

A male student!

Xie Qingcheng and Xie Lishen went to the same middle school. When Xie Qingcheng heard the announcement, standing below the stage during the school's morning assembly, he was stunned, eyes wide. Everyone recognized the name called out by the school leadership: The worst male student at the vocational school, who played around with both guys and girls—and somehow, Xie Lishen had gotten together with him.

After the morning assembly, a furious Xie Qingcheng found Xie Lishen and asked him what was going on. Xie Lishen just rolled his eyes. "Why does it matter to you if I'm with a man?"

Xie Qingcheng slapped him.

The two cousins had a massive fight, and Xie Lishen spat out all the resentment that had built up in his heart over the years. He insulted Xie Qingcheng and his parents, then left the Xie household that night to stay with his "boyfriend."

A fuse had been lit, but at the end of it was a conflict between the two families that had been destined to erupt since Xie Lishen was born. From then on, Xie Lishen and the Xie family's relationship faded.

When Xie Ping and his wife passed away, Xie Lishen didn't even attend the funeral. He took advantage of Xie Qingcheng's state of panic to run back and steal the thirty thousand yuan emergency fund that Xie Ping had hidden in a drawer. In his hurry, he even broke a jade pendant tucked into the same place. What had been Zhou Muying's favorite pendant was thrown to the ground and cracked in two.

Xie Qingcheng reported it to the police, but he was shocked when he arrived at the police station and the "criminal" he met there was an indifferent Xie Lishen.

"…Do you even know what you're doing?!" said Xie Qingcheng.

“Obviously. It should’ve belonged to my dad, anyway. Your dad took the money that should’ve belonged to my dad, and you took away what should’ve been my life.”

Utterly exhausted, Xie Qingcheng barely had any energy to argue with him.

The last thing he asked Xie Lishen was, “Xie Lishen, you’re a fucking beast… All this time, when have we ever treated you unfairly?”

Xie Lishen was silent for a few seconds. “You all stole what was mine, then gave it back to me like charity. Yet you want to talk about unfairness?”

“Your mother was in the wrong in the first place—”

“My mother was just pursuing her happiness.”

“…You shouldn’t think like that. You shouldn’t become someone like her.”

The cousins stared into each other’s peach blossom eyes.

“Xie Qingcheng, I will choose my own path. I’d rather be a villain than become a hypocrite like you. Just you wait. No matter how long it takes, a decade, two decades…I will make everything that’s yours into mine. Whatever Xie Ping took from my parents, I’ll come take it with my own hands. I will make you experience what it’s like to have everything taken from you. And whether I have mercy on you or not…that will be up to me in the future.”

Xie Qingcheng had no response.

“We’ll see who wins in the end, cousin.”

Before he knew it, Xie Qingcheng had smoked several cigarettes. Thinking about the past, he put his hand to his temple and took a deep breath. He had a splitting headache.

When he got up to take his medicine before bed, the phone suddenly rang. The call was from an unknown number.

Xie Qingcheng answered. “Hello.”

A familiar, deep voice came from the other end of the phone. “Mr. Xie.”

The headache intensified, and he felt a bit dizzy. His breath caught. The voice on the other end was He Yu’s.

“…Do you need something?”

“Nothing much. But I was thinking that I had slightly offended you at the café today. Though I simply didn’t want you to hit one of my people…” He Yu chuckled meaningfully. “I seem to recall that the arm I grabbed was the one that you injured. Injured saving me.”

There was no response from Xie Qingcheng.

“Give me a chance to apologize,” said He Yu. “Let’s have dinner next weekend?”

He endured his headache. “No need.”

“From what I remember, you’re not a petty person,” He Yu said with a slight smile. “You won’t even give me the chance to make it up?” Before Xie Qingcheng could reply, he went on, “You don’t need to give me an answer immediately. There are still a couple of days before the weekend, so you can think about it. Maybe over dinner, I’ll be willing to reveal some secrets about what’s happened in the past two years?”

Xie Qingcheng stayed silent.

“Let’s plan for it for now.” Another smile. “I’ll send you the address. Whether you come or not, I’ll be waiting for you there on the weekend.” His voice was pleasant, and it’d taken on a seductive tone since he’d grown older. “I hope we can meet again.”

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Chapter 199:
Hurting Each Other

XIE QINGCHENG HADN'T planned on going at first—but then He Yu took Yaya.

The nursery teacher didn't understand the gravity of the situation. "We know he's your friend from the newspaper, and we know he was a hero in the naval battle too—so when he came to pick up Yaya, I let him take her." She adjusted her hair. "Is there a problem?"

"…Please don't give the child to any of my friends in the future." Xie Qingcheng's face was dark.

"But he's a hero…" The teacher felt wronged. "I'd definitely check with the parents if it was anyone else…"

Thinking that he was going to have to write a letter of complaint to the head of the nursery once things were settled, Xie Qingcheng walked out without looking back and dialed the unfamiliar number that he'd spoken to earlier that week.

After three rings, the call was answered.

"Hello."

"He Yu." Xie Qingcheng couldn't stand it when people used children as a threat. "What is the meaning of this?"

He Yu smiled slightly. "Oh, I just thought Yaya was cute, so I wanted to invite her to my place."

"If you have anything you want to say or do, you can talk to me directly. Don't touch her."

"…Do you think I'm some unscrupulous criminal?" he asked calmly. "I told you, I just wanted her to visit. I have no other intentions. Besides, what would I want from a two-year-old child? She's worthless to me. If you're really worried, just come pick her up."

"…Give me half an hour. I'll go to the address you sent me."

Twenty minutes later, Xie Qingcheng was there. He couldn't tell what kind of place it was just by looking at the name on the map, but when he arrived he found a luxury residential area. When he entered the property's grounds, he had to drive past a large artificial lake and lawn before he reached any residences—and the drive took about fifteen minutes.

As Xie Qingcheng pulled up to He Yu's villa, the newly hired housekeeper was waiting at the door.

"Mr. Xie, please follow me."

The villa, built in an English style, was larger than the He family's previous one. The front door faced a private lawn where two racehorses grazed, one black, one white.

The housekeeper introduced the villa's architecture to Xie Qingcheng as they walked, but he wasn't interested in any of that. He asked to be taken directly to Yaya. With a polite smile, the housekeeper complied, leading him directly to a guest suite on the third floor.

The door opened. As soon as he walked in, Xie Qingcheng saw his niece lying on a large bed covered with a soft wool blanket. He immediately strode over, calling out her name.

"…Mm…" The little girl woke up from her dreams and yawned, cake crumbs stuck to the corner of her mouth. When she saw Xie Qingcheng, she giggled. "Unco…"

Xie Qingcheng sighed in relief and picked her up from the bed. "Why did you go home with a stranger? What happened? Did anyone bully you?"

He was asking too many questions at once, and the toddler couldn't even remember all of them, much less answer them. She looked at Xie Qingcheng in a short daze. "No, the handsome gege played with me and gave me tasty pastwies…and told me a stowy…about Nick the Fox and…a little wabbit…"

"Then how did you fall asleep?"

Yaya paused for a moment, thinking hard before she remembered. "I got sleepy from listening to the wabbit stowy…"

"Then where did the big brother go?"

"He…" Yaya thought harder. "…Went to pick up the fome."

“Phone?”

“Mhm.”

A voice suddenly came from behind him. “Mr. Xie, it seems you really did think I would do something to her. Is that right?”

Still holding Yaya, Xie Qingcheng turned around. The housekeeper had tactfully left, so He Yu, in an elegant suit, stood alone at the heavy walnut door of the guest suite, looking at him indifferently.

He had actually come to the room soon after Xie Qingcheng. Though he had been in a conference call when Xie Qingcheng arrived, it was nothing too important, and he wasn’t in the mood to continue it. In the same moment Xie Qingcheng had leaned over to pick the child up from the bed, He Yu had received a message from the housekeeper and gone downstairs. Thus, he saw the whole thing.

He should have spoken up immediately, but he realized he wanted to watch the scene for a bit longer. His mouth and brain went along with the impulse, and stayed quiet.

Leaning against the door frame, he looked at Xie Qingcheng’s tall, upright figure bent halfway over the bed and its white, fluffy blankets. His back was slightly arched, the lines of his body as smooth as he remembered…all the way down to his narrow waist, still so lean and slim…

How beautiful.

His fingers throbbed, wanting to hold it as tightly as before.

He knew that his desire for Xie Qingcheng had only grown stronger. Though he spoke coldly to him, just watching Xie Qingcheng bend down and pick up a child made his heart restless. Nobody other than himself would have believed that the only thing he wanted to do right now was walk up to Xie Qingcheng from behind and press him into the pillows before he could react—and didn’t he like children?

Sure, if Xie Qingcheng could get pregnant, He Yu could impregnate him tonight. He didn’t mind getting him pregnant more than once.

When Xie Qingcheng picked Yaya up and began coaxing her, the dark desire in He Yu’s heart became even more wild. When Xie Qingcheng was taking care of Yaya, there was an aura about him that almost took He

Yu's life. He looked so holy and pure—so pure that He Yu wanted to ruin him, yet so serious that He Yu wanted to see him lose control. He was still so resolute, so resolute that He Yu wanted to see the bewildered gaze in his expression as he broke down…

The reason He Yu had called out to him in the end was because he was worried that he would actually do something worse than an animal.

He loved the man's face in that moment. He didn't want to do that yet.

Xie Qingcheng heard him and turned to look at him. He didn't say anything, but Yaya smiled. "Gege…"

"Call him Mr. He," Xie Qingcheng said.

"Huh? But why?"

"It's all right. Call me Gege." He Yu walked leisurely over and stopped in front of Xie Qingcheng, but he stared at Wei Mengya. "How was it? Were you happy playing here?"

"Yes!"

"Then…I'll come pick you up again sometime if there's a chance."

"Okay, okay!"

A darkness came over Xie Qingcheng's face. "He Yu, what do you mean by this?"

"I want to make friends of all ages," he said, chuckling. He looked at his watch and said, "It's getting late. Dinner before you leave?"

"No need."

"You shouldn't reject me." He Yu smiled gently. "After all, Yaya likes it here a lot. Maybe she'll come here often in the future."

"…He Yu, you're not taking the Wei family seriously, are you?"

He Yu widened his eyes. "Congratulations. You've finally figured me out."

Xie Qingcheng didn't have anything to say to that.

"Mr. Xie, it's better to reconcile a feud than to create one. It's just a meal. For the sake of our old friendship, please honor me with your

presence," said He Yu. "Now please, after you."

He Yu had arranged a private family dinner, inviting the chef of a well-known, antiquated restaurant to his home to cook for them. The meal was delivered to the private dining room in the villa.

Yaya couldn't eat strong-flavored foods, so the housekeeper took her to the first floor hall for a children's meal specially prepared for her—leaving He Yu and Xie Qingcheng alone in the dining room.

Dishes were served one after another. Sweet and sour lotus root, spicy stir-fry, stewed snow pears with rock sugar, custard bunnies… The chef was clearly capable of preparing more exquisite dishes, but the ones he served today were rather simple.

There was even Yangzhou fried rice with lots of prawns, and dumplings packed full of bamboo shoots, water chestnuts, and fresh meat. The dumplings were tightly wrapped around a secret—only the two people sitting silently across from each other knew the meaning of these dishes.

The table was soon filled with food that formed connections to their shared memories.

Standing up to pour a glass of red wine for Xie Qingcheng himself, He Yu raised his glass. "We haven't had a meal like this together in a long time. Do you remember these dishes?"

Xie Qingcheng didn't respond.

"Please don't take it personally that I helped Anthony when he got into an argument with you," said He Yu. "He wouldn't be able to beat you, and he's one of mine now, so I have to look after him."

Xie Qingcheng lifted his eyes. He'd already been irritated when He Yu told him as much the other day, and hearing it again made his eardrums hurt—and his heart.

But he didn't lose his composure. "I know," he said coldly.

I know that he's yours now, but you don't have to keep on repeating it.

He Yu folded his fingers and stared at him. "What did Anthony tell you?"

“Some incidents of the past,” Xie Qingcheng said. He didn’t want to talk about their love life.

“Well, he’s your cousin, after all.”

“When did you learn we’re related?”

“When I was in Australia,” said He Yu. “I began to notice that you two were very similar.”

There was no response from Xie Qingcheng. They felt similar, and so Anthony had completely replaced him.

He Yu had once told him so earnestly that he was irreplaceable, that he would love him every minute, every second… Perhaps everything had changed when he killed the He Yu of the past himself.

Xie Lishen had once promised he would take away Xie Qingcheng’s most precious belonging, and now, he had finally gotten his wish.

“Try the stewed snow pear with rock sugar.” Seeing that Xie Qingcheng wasn’t going to reply, He Yu pushed the soup toward him. “It should be pretty good, since it’s made by the chef.”

When they separated three years ago, He Yu had stewed a bowl of snow pear with rock sugar and fritillary bulb for him, but Xie Qingcheng didn’t drink it before he said goodbye. Now, the soup was like the soul of an old love returned. But once the exquisite porcelain bowl was opened to display its delicately stewed pears, it was clear it was just a dish. It was pretty, but it held none of the deep affection of the boy from the past.

Xie Qingcheng refused to show any weakness. Slowly, under He Yu’s watchful gaze, he ate the snow pear bite by bite—the fritillary bulb was incredibly bitter, and no amount of rock sugar could mask it. When he was finished, he put down his spoon to stare at the young man across from him. “He Yu, I don’t have any ulterior motives. But I feel I should warn you that Xie Lishen won’t treat you with sincerity.”

Surprisingly, He Yu paused for a moment, before he smiled. “Sincerity? I don’t need that from him. As long as he can make me feel good, that’s fine. Sincerity isn’t worth much, anyway. I used to treat others sincerely, and I never got anything worthwhile out of it. I’m doing well

now. In his company, I don’t feel lonely. I told you before that I was only obsessed with you because I was young and narrow-minded.”

Xie Qingcheng swirled the wine in his glass, lowering his eyelashes, and stayed silent.

He didn’t know why He Yu had invited him to this meal. If it was just to discuss this sort of thing, then he already knew enough. Xie Qingcheng had been hit like this over and over again until he could barely feel the impact; only the humiliation and ridicule.

How much did He Yu hate him, to so be so persistently eager to see him lose his composure before him, to see him break down, to see his vulnerable face? Xie Qingcheng felt weary and uninterested. In the end, he didn’t want to force himself to do anything, so he pushed his plate away and got up.

“What’s wrong?”

He looked at He Yu expressionlessly. “I want to leave.”

“Why?”

“This is uninteresting to me. Is it fun for you?”

He Yu, staring at him, didn’t miss a single expression that flashed across his face. At that moment, Xie Qingcheng’s cell phone, sitting on the table, suddenly rang.

He Yu glanced at the caller ID.

Chen Man.

He slowly lifted his gaze and gave a slight smile, an expression that did not clearly read as peaceful or dangerous. “Is this why you’re in such a hurry to leave, Mr. Xie? You’re in a rush to get to your next appointment and see your Young Master Chen Yan?”

Chen Man’s call was a coincidence, but when the two of them met each other’s gaze, Xie Qingcheng didn’t want to tell the truth. He Yu and Xie Lishen were entangled, and Xie Qingcheng didn’t want to seem lonely. He couldn’t give He Yu the impression that he was waiting obsessively for him—he didn’t want to seem so pathetic.

So he didn’t answer.

To He Yu this silence was an acquiescence, and his almond eyes instantly became as bottomless as the ocean. “…Are you two together?”

Xie Qingcheng stared at him. “That’s my personal business.”

For a moment, Xie Qingcheng saw anger flash in He Yu’s eyes. But he turned away, stared at the table decorations for a while, then picked up his wine glass and swirled the sanguine liquid inside. Then he drank the red wine in one go, like he was drinking blood.

He put the glass down.

“Then I have to congratulate you. You can still find a young man with an excellent background like Mr. Chen at your age.” Raising his gaze again, He Yu smiled as he went on, “Chen Yan has such unusual tastes. You’re almost forty—you’re a haggard, withered cripple. Mr. Xie, doesn’t his stomach turn when he kisses you?”

There was no space for Xie Qingcheng to backpedal in the face of such harsh words. He sank into silence, pursing his lips slightly.

“You surprise me as well,” He Yu added. “I recall that in the past you could never accept someone of the same sex, and you were always so frigid. How have you changed so much in the past two years?”

There was no response.

Seeing him silent, He Yu’s eyes grew colder, and the sarcasm in his smile deepened. He didn’t even care to keep up his demeanor anymore. “Did I train you too well, and now you can’t go a day without a man? Can a harmless little rabbit like Mr. Chen really satisfy you? Can he make you happy? Hilarious. Have you become less picky now that you’re older, and anyone will do? Don’t you think he’s useless and uninteresting?”

Xie Qingcheng looked at He Yu, smiling yet visibly losing control. A moment later, he said, “He Yu.”

“What?”

“I thought you would be more gracious.”

He Yu was silent.

Looking down for a beat, Xie Qingcheng took his coat, buttoned it carefully, and briefly acknowledged the young man sitting with a wine glass

in hand and a volatile expression: “Goodbye.”

He turned and left.

He Yu didn’t stop him this time—and once he was alone, couldn’t hide his anger anymore. He smashed the just-refilled wine glass, wine spilling across the table. He yanked the tablecloth off, and the nigh-untouched dishes fell to the ground.

…Xie Qingcheng actually…

He was actually with Chen Man!

How dare he… How could he?!

There had been various restrictions placed on He Yu in Australia, and so he hadn’t been able to look into Xie Qingcheng’s situation. But after he returned, he couldn’t help himself—he went to Moyu Alley alone, while Xie Qingcheng wasn’t home.

The house was guarded against gentlemen, but not thieves, so He Yu entered easily. He stood in the small room with the lights shut off, and looked around, greedily taking in Xie Qingcheng’s scent that suffused the air. He saw the books on his desk, the clothes on his bed, the medicine beside the table… Everything was the same as it was before, as if the past few years hadn’t even passed.

At the time, he was reassured not to see anything of Chen Man’s, nor any sign of a woman. But now Xie Qingcheng had admitted himself that he was dating Chen Man.

How far had they gone?

Holding hands? Kissing? …Sex?

He Yu couldn’t bear to think of it. He kicked the table over, left the room with a gloomy expression, and walked to the bedroom. The readings on the monitoring device on his chest began to rise rapidly. The device, a pendant, was the same type of device that Xie Qingcheng had given him before; but the bracelet he used to wear was unusable after the shipwreck. Now, Anthony used this pendant to monitor his emotions.

When the pendant’s light turned completely red, He Yu’s cell phone rang.

“What’s going on, He Yu?” It was Anthony’s voice. “Why did you suddenly lose control? I’ll be right there…”

“No need.” He Yu lifted his head and lay down on his sizable bed, panting. “What did you say to Xie Qingcheng when you met with him before?”

“…Nothing much. We only spoke of the past.” Anthony changed the subject. “How are you now? Do you have your medicine? Or I can hypnotize you…”

“I said…” He Yu gritted his teeth. “I don’t need you to take care of me.”

Anthony was silent.

“Let me be alone for a bit.”

He Yu hung up and threw the cell phone aside.

There was an insane burst of energy rushing through his chest, and his ribs and flesh could hardly hold it back. Xie Qingcheng’s words kept echoing in his ears, admitting he was dating Chen Man. Jealousy twisted his face hideously, and the pain of not getting what he wanted made his selfish desires, his selfish heart, swell more and more.

His Xie Qingcheng.

His person…was Chen Man’s now?

Suddenly he flipped over, punching the headboard with one hand, grabbing the messy bedding. But he couldn’t grasp the hand that used to intertwine with his own. He thought about Xie Qingcheng’s eyes, his nose, his lips… About the love, hate, and joy they’d experienced.

Those were all Chen Man’s now?!

His reason was torn apart by jealousy, and his chest rose and fell vigorously. To relieve the intense emotions that stood on the verge of tearing him apart, he conjured an image of Xie Qingcheng, touching the source of his anger.

He hated it so much… He gnashed his teeth and felt his insides about to split open.

Xie Qingcheng…

“Xie Qingcheng…!” he mumbled. His fingers were burning, hatred tumbling in his chest. He called that name as his eyes turned bloodshot beneath his messy bangs.

But the person he called out for didn’t know of He Yu’s feelings, his hatred. He’d already gotten into a taxi, already told Chen Man where to meet him.

He drove away from him.

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Chapter 200:
And I’m Going to Oppose You in Every Way

THE REASON CHEN MAN had called Xie Qingcheng was that a new variant of Obedience Potion No. 2 had appeared. “The Mandela Syndicate has gone even further than they did last time,” he said, asking him to meet at Meiyu Private Hospital.

Chen Man greeted him at the door, and he explained the details to Xie Qingcheng as they headed for the laboratory on the top floor. “They used their last version of Obedience Potion No. 2 to defraud cancer patients—and it was a disgusting scheme, but there were only so many people in their pool of victims. They probably didn’t get a lot of samples from that test.”

“And this time?”

“This is one of the victims of their newest biochemical experiment,” Chen Man said as he led him inside. What Xie Qingcheng saw made his heart drop in his chest.

A dozen young women lay in treatment tanks—some looked young enough to still be in high school. Each of them had rows of tubes sticking out from their bodies, and a whole crew of staff, including the hospital director, were administering special cocktails of drugs as emergency treatment.

“What’s going on?” Xie Qingcheng asked.

“Duan Wen exploited these young women’s desire for beauty.” Chen Man’s face was stiff with fury. “Our investigation uncovered preparations for this batch of experiments being made as early as half a year ago. They identified how parts of the cosmetic surgery industry resort to underhanded methods for profit. Stuff like paying influencers to write advertorials about their own cosmetic journeys, subtly promoting body image insecurity—those trends like A4 waists, collarbones you can raise fish in, or barbie faces. Next, they use data analysis to put up targeted ads for cosmetic procedures, and lure in people who want to be beautiful.”

Chen Man sighed. “Everyone wants to improve themselves—it’s natural to want to be beautiful. The reason cosmetic surgery was originally developed was to allow people with certain defects, like people who’d suffered major disfiguring injuries, to live a better life. But the industry has gotten more and more intoxicated with the capitalist greed for profit. It’s insane. They’re constantly brainwashing society with newer, more unreachable beauty standards, telling them that a youthful appearance is best, that you’ll only be loved if you have big eyes and a high nose, and people’s perceptions of beauty get narrower by the day…”

As he led Xie Qingcheng through the rows of equipment setups, he saw one shockingly bloody scene after another. Every case file included a picture of what these girls had looked like before—and each one of them was unrecognizable compared to their current selves.

Xie Qingcheng stopped at the station where the director was working. Greeting his friend, he picked up the patient’s case file from a nearby counter. The picture showed a young girl with monolids and a round nose, who looked quite cute smiling for the camera. In Xie Qingcheng’s eyes, there was nothing she needed to change about herself.

“This girl wanted a whole-face reshaping and lipofilling,” the director explained. “The boy she liked said she was ugly—her eyes were too small, her nose was too flat, and her chest wasn’t full enough.”

“She didn’t need to hurt herself for that kind of scum,” Xie Qingcheng muttered. “She wasn’t the one who needed to go to the doctor. He was.”

“…Not every girl has a brother like you.” The director sighed and flipped through the girl’s case file for Xie Qingcheng. “Lipofilling is a delicate operation. You need to inject a specific amount of fatty tissue through multiple channels at once, and if you accidentally inject too much, the patient will suffer large patches of tissue necrosis. A bad surgical complication might require a total mastectomy, or even cost her her life.”

But human lives only mattered to their fellow humans, and society was packed with demons in human skin. It was those demons who enabled these unhinged schemes and crooked tricks. Demons saw humans like humans saw livestock. Stopping a beating heart to fulfill their own goals and desires was nothing to them.

“This isn’t the scariest part,” Chen Man cut in. “People do all sorts of absurd things for profit, and illicit plastic surgery practices are everywhere. Doctors who’ve only ever trained on chicken thighs are sewing up real human patients, and their equipment and medication comes from disreputable sources… And that gives a huge opportunity to black market pharmaceutical dealers like Duan Wen .”

“You mean to say, Duan Wen seeded the gray-market cosmetic surgery industry with experimental drugs, making these insecure children his unknowing test subjects?” asked Xie Qingcheng.

“That’s exactly right.”

Xie Qingcheng had no words. Every time he thought these people had sunk to a new low, they scrambled to go lower. In the pursuit of their own scientific aspirations, Duan Wen and his associates trampled over human lives, ground the law beneath their boots, spat on the basic dignity of others, crushed countless dreams… It really seemed there was no possible cruelty they weren’t willing to commit.

“How many victims are there?”

“No fewer than three hundred, from what we’ve ascertained so far,” Chen Man said. “And that’s only because the Dreambreakers caught on in time and intervened before the drugs could make it to the market on a larger scale. Otherwise, with the rate of patient turnover in the cosmetic surgery industry, it probably would’ve been more than ten thousand. It looks like they only had the chance to run tests at a few specific locations for two days —that’s the one silver lining in all this misery.”

Xie Qingcheng had no response to that.

“Xie-ge, the reason Project Dreambreaker invited you here today is that we want you to help us develop treatment for these victims as fast as possible. The others know you were in America for over two years—you visited their laboratories and learned a lot there, so…” Chen Man tilted his head to look at Xie Qingcheng. The expression on the latter’s face was slightly haggard. It was clear to see that his health was still very poor.

Chen Man’s heart softened. He couldn’t help himself—he abandoned the spiel he’d been told to give and spoke genuinely. “You’ve only just

gotten back and we're already asking so much of you… Can you handle it?"

Xie Qingcheng stared unblinkingly at the young woman soaking in the tank. This girl should been living a healthy, confident youth…

"Xie-ge?"

He hummed in acknowledgment. "I am a doctor, and a researcher."

Finally he looked away from the treatment tank, his gaze landing back on Chen Man. Even if the light in Xie Qingcheng's eyes had dimmed, there was still a strength to them that emanated from his very core.

"This is my duty. I'll do it."

After filling Xie Qingcheng in on all the details of the collaboration, Chen Man walked him back downstairs.

"Duan Wen is simply too ambitious," Xie Qingcheng said, once he and Chen Man were in the elevator. "This kind of thing will never stop so long as he walks free."

"That's easier said than done." Frustrated with their lack of progress, Chen Man paused, then asked, "Has He Yu reached out to you lately?"

He didn't get a straight answer. "He and I no longer have any sort of relationship."

"What could have happened in the last three years for him to end up working for Duan Wen?" Chen Man wondered. Xie Qingcheng didn't respond. "He's in the spotlight, while Duan Wen is in the shadows," Chen Man went on. "But to be honest, he's even more difficult to handle—his hands look clean, so none of us can do anything to him. Xie-ge, you have to be careful. He's really smart… There aren't many people who can play him and win."

"I know."

The elevator arrived at the first floor lobby, where Yaya was still waiting quietly, playing with a jellyfish toy a nurse had given her. When she saw Xie Qingcheng, she reached out her arms with a radiant smile. "Unca, up!"

He casually scooped her into his arms. "Let's go home."

“Okay… Achoo!”

“It’s late, and it’s cold outside,” said Chen Man. “Xie-ge, let Yaya take my jacket. We don’t want her to catch a cold.”

He took off his jacket and handed it to Xie Qingcheng, who thanked him before flagging down a taxi. Neither of them noticed the low-profile passenger van parked in a spot across from the private hospital. Inside it sat He Yu, observing the casual intimacy between Xie Qingcheng and Chen Man. His expression grew darker and darker, bloodshot veins spreading through the whites of his eyes like a spider’s web.

From that day onward, Xie Qingcheng became busier and busier.

But having something to do actually energized him. And working at Meiyu Laboratory meant the director and the rest of them always made sure he was taking his medicine and doing his treatments, so he didn’t actually look too fatigued.

Meiyu had become an important base of operations for Project Dreambreaker. There were strict security procedures for entry, and no non-essential personnel were allowed inside. Xie Xue was quite reassured, and so was everyone else who cared about Xie Qingcheng.

“I brought everyone lunch.” Chen Man was now one of the main providers of security and transport for the staff at Meiyu. He would come check in almost every day. Of course, some of the researchers quickly figured out exactly what he was up to, sidling over for some friendly teasing.

“Wow, Young Master Chen, you’ve never brought us food before. How come you started covering three meals a day as soon as Professor Xie signed on?”

“Oh my, and it’s the special from that new restaurant that’s blowing up online. We’re really getting the five star treatment here!”

“It’s all thanks to Professor Xie.”

Chen Man was quite pleased that they’d noticed, but he still had to make the bare minimum effort to keep up a facade, “Have we been starving you?” he joked. “Even good food isn’t enough to buy your silence, huh? I’m not trying to play favorites; I’ve treated you all pretty well in the past!”

He picked out a healthy, well-balanced boxed lunch and went to eat with Xie Qingcheng.

In the blink of an eye, over two months had passed.

Because of their work, Xie Qingcheng saw Chen Man nearly every single day. Sometimes they even went home together, since they lived in the same direction. He Yu watched all of this from the shadows, and his torment grew ever greater by the day.

In those two months, Meiyu Laboratory successfully developed a drug that could treat the effects of Obedience Potion No. 2. After a bout of wild joy, they decided to send samples to regulators so they could start the approval process immediately.

Ever since the Obedience Potion No. 2 scandal broke publicly, a number of biotech companies had been developing treatments for the drug. These companies had a few of the pieces, but not the full picture—they knew little about the origins of Obedience Potion No. 2. The regulators received one candidate drug after another, but none of them ever passed the approval process. Just because no company had passed yet, though, didn't mean there was no chance that some dark horse might break through. Every second counted.

The scientists of Huzhou's regulatory body were a bunch of stubborn old traditionalists who placed research results above everything else. They were relatively independent from the rest of the government, and all they cared about was whether the drug worked or not. If Meiyu wanted to put their treatment on the market soon, they had to receive their approval, and they had to be the first to do so.

"The first project to pass will receive the largest amount of technical support and media coverage, and they'll get to make the first impression on the public," Chen Man said. "We cannot wait. Next Monday—I pulled some strings and made the earliest reservation I could—next Monday, we'll deliver a report about our new drug at the Huzhou Research Center."

All the researchers in the lab looked exhausted, but their eyes shone with excitement. A round of applause broke out for Officer Chen, the man who'd ensured their efforts went smoothly all this time.

“I need to choose a few people to make up the best possible presentation team,” he added. “I hope you’ll cooperate with my efforts.”

Chen Man was just being polite. Everyone knew he was serious about his work, and that he’d choose fairly without any issues. The team for Monday’s report was quickly finalized. As one of the leading members of the research team, Xie Qingcheng was naturally included—in fact, he was cast as the main presenter.

Chen Man was halfway through briefing the team on the logistical details when his phone rang. Seeing that it was a call from his grandfather, he left to answer it right away. A few moments later, he returned to the lab, expression grim.

“What happened, Officer Chen?”

Xie Qingcheng’s eyes fell on him. “What is it…?”

He sucked in a deep breath. “My grandfather just called. Another company will be presenting a novel drug along with us on Monday; apparently they’ve developed a highly effective treatment.”

“How is that possible?” one of the researchers exclaimed. “There’s no way they could develop a targeted treatment in so little time without a background knowledge of RN-13, unless…”

“Unless,” said Chen Man. “Unless our competitor is named New He Technologies… That is to say, unless we’re dealing with He Yu’s new international corporation.”

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Chapter 201:
I'll Resort to Underhanded Methods

EVERYONE was stunned.

"He Yu?!"

"Isn't he…working with Duan Wen? How could they give him the chance to—"

"What is he, a cat trying to make medicine for mice? He must have an ulterior motive…"

As the clamor of voices rose around him, Chen Man shook his head. "There's nothing we can do. We know that He Yu is working for Duan Wen now, but they've done a good job cutting off that chain of evidence, and not all the higher-ups believe us. And He Yu has his own backers too—he has to be pulling strings to get his application in the door. Even my grandfather doesn't have the sway to get him pulled out of this race."

Chen Man sighed. He looked over each member of the research team, before his gaze finally landed on Xie Qingcheng's face. "But I know we won't let him get his way. The approval will be ours in the end—our work will speak for itself."

He looked to the rest of the room again.

"I trust you all. We must not let this project go to the He family's pharmaceutical company."

The morning of the presentation, the grounds outside Huzhou Research Center were packed with reporters.

The victims of Obedience Potion No. 2 were like a series of ticking time bombs, and their existence had been causing mass panic. Everyone was eager for news of a drug that could treat them, and people had high hopes for both teams participating in today's conference. There was little need to explain how Meiyu, the group unofficially nominated by the

government, had earned such high expectations. But He Yu's research team was receiving a lot of public attention too.

This was He Yu's first undertaking in his family's field since returning to the country. The former He Pharmaceuticals had become a criminal company in Wei Rong's hands, but He Yu wasn't her blood-related son—in fact, he had helped the police overturn Wei Rong's criminal empire. Everyone was curious to see what he would achieve, and his past actions had earned him a lot of goodwill.

The conference would formally begin at ten o'clock in the morning. Before then, both teams were scheduled to prepare in break rooms at the research center.

"I saw the other team," Xiao-Wu, the youngest member of the Meiyu team, whispered to his companions as he returned from the restroom. "They're in Break Room Three, discussing the safety of their drug—oh, right!" Xiao-Wu slapped the side of his head and turned to Xie Qingcheng. "There's a guy with their company who looks a little like Professor Xie! It looks like he's their primary speaker, too!"

"…Drink some milk and calm down. There's no need to get so worked up," said Xie Qingcheng. He hadn't realized Anthony would be here.

He Yu must have had some reason for producing this drug beyond simply treating the disease. He could not let him get what he wanted. As this thought crossed Xie Qingcheng's mind, someone knocked on the door behind them. The Meiyu team turned to look—and immediately went quiet.

It was He Yu.

Boss He was immaculately dressed in a formal collared shirt as he stood in the doorway with a genteel smile. "My apologies for disturbing you. I wanted to have a few words with your Professor Xie in private."

Chen Man stepped forward. Three years had passed since the last time he'd seen He Yu, and he was no longer the naive young man whom He Yu could toy with as he pleased. The strength of his presence had grown along with the rank insignia pinned to his shoulder.

"He can't step away right now. If there's something you need to discuss, you can talk to me. I'm responsible for supervising Meiyu's

project.”

He Yu lowered his eyes. His smile stayed pasted on his face, but turned frigidly cold. “How much does Officer Chen understand about scientific research?”

“I only know a few superficial details, but I doubt He-laoban knows much more,” said Chen Man. “I’m sure it’ll be enough to communicate with you.”

The atmosphere immediately grew tense. Everyone stared at the two men, worried that a fight would erupt any second.

But in the end, He Yu just laughed. “It was just a joke. Today we’re competitors, so of course we won’t be sharing our research findings. I just had some personal business I wanted to discuss with Professor Xie.” His eyes never left Chen Man as he spoke. “My grasp of the research is rather shallow, but my understanding of Professor Xie is very, very…deep.”

The clear innuendo in his words edged on outright vulgar. No one but Chen Man saw it, but He Yu’s eyes flashed with malice as he held Chen Man’s gaze. “Does Officer Chen wish to discuss Professor Xie’s personal business in his place as well?”

“Why couldn’t I?” retorted Chen Man.

He Yu’s eyes turned even colder. The corner of his mouth twitched. “And what gives you the right? The fact that you’re his boyfriend?”

Chen Man paused. “Boyfr—”

That was enough for Xie Qingcheng. He got up and walked out of the room, interrupting He Yu before he could humiliate him entirely. “Let’s go. Just say what you have to say.”

Chen Man concluded that He Yu must have been mocking him. He steeled himself and grabbed Xie Qingcheng’s wrist. “Ge, don’t waste your time on him.”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t want to waste time arguing right now. He took a look at his watch and said, “There’s ten more minutes before the conference begins. It won’t be a problem. Go get ready. I’ll meet you in the conference room upstairs.”

With that, he left with He Yu.

He Yu led him to another small break room and closed the door behind them.

“Talk,” said Xie Qingcheng. “What personal business did you have with me?”

He Yu’s eyes stayed fixed on Xie Qingcheng’s wrist, where Chen Man’s fingers had just been.

“Three years ago, Chen Yan was still a little kid, but it looks like he’s a man now.” He walked up to Xie Qingcheng, abandoning any pretense of keeping a polite distance. He looked down at him, that low voice murmuring directly into his ear in a tone that betrayed no emotion, “Who changed him so much? Was it you, Xie Qingcheng?”

Silence was the only response that deserved.

“Another boy made into a man in your bed?”

After he came back from the dead, Xie Qingcheng had assumed nothing He Yu could say would anger him again. But he was wrong. His reincarnated self was nothing like the old He Yu—after repeatedly stabbing Xie Qingcheng through the heart, he had to verbally humiliate him to finish it off.

A layer of frost finally iced over Xie Qingcheng’s eyes.

“This has nothing to do with you. If this was the personal business you wished to discuss with me, then our conversation ends here. Excuse me.” He tried to step around He Yu and push open the door.

But before he could pass him, He Yu suddenly slammed him against it.

“What are you doing?!”

A hand tightened around Xie Qingcheng’s wrist, flames licking up inside He Yu’s chest at the familiar, satin-smooth sensation. His fingertips traced the phantom outline of Chen Man’s touch, over and over. After he pinned Xie Qingcheng down, the hot bulk of He Yu’s body drew closer, looming over him like the peak of a mountain.

That fragrance…

It was a cold, clear scent that could only belong to Xie Qingcheng. He Yu craved more; he was almost overtaken by the urge to tear open Xie Qingcheng's painted skin and sink his teeth into the flesh beneath, that flesh which bewitched his very soul, which he loved and hated in equal measure.

He longed to kiss him, to tear him apart.

To swallow him whole.

Xie Qingcheng struggled beneath his hands, eyes sharp. "What are you doing?!"

"Mm… I didn't want to do anything, but today's circumstances have upset me a great deal. It reminded me of that naval battle from three years ago. You chose Chen Man's side; you chose to oppose me." He Yu's fervid breath puffed against the back of Xie Qingcheng's ear, and intentional or not, his lips brushed against that sensitive patch of skin.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not happy about this." He tightened his grip, slowly raising Xie Qingcheng's wrist overhead to push it against the door. His palm pressed to the back of Xie Qingcheng's hand as he spread his fingers, interlocking them with his own.

Standing behind him, He Yu continued whispering as if into a lover's ear. "Xie Qingcheng, I'm not as heartless as you. If I had any other choice, I wouldn't have pitted us against each other."

"Then quit the competition…!"

"How could I?" He Yu drawled. "You know this is the first trial in my path to conquer the domestic pharmaceutical market. You didn't have to help me, but did you really have to oppose me instead? And not only are you opposing me, you're even trying to talk me into quitting of my own volition…"

He Yu scoffed, and it was impossible to tell if his voice was ice or magma as he spoke into Xie Qingcheng's ear. "You must be pretty protective of your new husband, hm? For you not to even acknowledge your ex?"

There must be something wrong with his head for him to say such ridiculous things at a time like this, thought Xie Qingcheng.

What he didn’t know was that nearly every day for the past two months, He Yu had been watching him spend all his time with Chen Man from the shadows. Imagining all the intimate entanglements that must be going on behind the scenes sent him into violent fits of envy, like a hole being drilled through his heart. Sixty days of torture could drive any normal man mad, much less a lunatic like He Yu.

Xie Qingcheng began to struggle violently underneath him.

But He Yu kept one hand interlocked with his, while his other bent Xie Qingcheng’s free arm behind his back. “Xie Qingcheng, you really don’t know a good thing when you see it… You know, I’ve let you off over and over again, and yet you continue to infuriate me, over and over again. So you just have to help Chen Yan, huh? No matter how many times this happens, you’ll always choose his side, always choose to stand against me, hm?”

“You’re working for Duan Wen, you and Xie Lishen both,” Xie Qingcheng said through clenched teeth. “How could I let a drug developed by the two of you make it to market… You’re toying with human lives.”

“Oh, you’re such a saint.” He Yu’s hands tightened, nearly twisting Xie Qingcheng’s weakened arm from its socket.

It hurt, but Xie Qingcheng wasn’t willing to make a sound. Unable to bear it, he arched his neck, silently panting for breath as his vision blurred.

That was when He Yu freed one hand to grab Xie Qingcheng by the jaw, twist his face around, and—

Xie Qingcheng’s eyes flew open in shock.

He Yu had leaned down and kissed him.

It was a rough, violent kiss that stole all the air from Xie Qingcheng’s lungs, as if a wicked dragon had freed itself from its bonds to pillage him wantonly.

This reunion of a kiss after three years of separation raised a tsunami in both of their hearts. Dusty old memories threw off the shackles of time, blasting them with familiar scent and familiar desire, assaulting their spines with tingling, their scalps with prickling, and their vision with waves of

dizziness. Infernal flames enveloped their bodies, as if to burn them to ashes and melt their remains together.

Something passed from He Yu's mouth into Xie Qingcheng's during the furious kiss. It felt like a piece of hard candy, with a strong rose flavor. He Yu aggressively pushed the candy down Xie Qingcheng's throat, forcing him to swallow it whole before drunkenly continuing to kiss his lips.

It only ended when Xie Qingcheng, recovering, came to his senses and used every bit of strength in his body to push He Yu away. He choked out a series of coughs as he stared at He Yu, face ashen.

"What the hell did… What did you feed me?"

He Yu lowered his eyelashes. His lips were still painted red with blood from where Xie Qingcheng had bitten him. His tongue flicked out to swipe it away. He let out a chuckle, before laughing louder and louder, echoing through the room… Abruptly he looked back up, eyes filled with madness.

"What did I feed you? That was the good stuff—much harder to develop than Obedience Potion No. 2," he murmured with bloody lips, studying Xie Qingcheng the way one would study an object in their possession: a treasure he couldn't bear to shatter, yet was loath to let out of his grasp.

"This thing… Everyone on the island calls it a beast-taming pill. Of course, it's not only for taming beasts. It can also be used on obstinate, coldhearted people like you, Doctor Xie." Slowly adjusting his collar, he approached Xie Qingcheng again. "Now that you've taken it, you'll slowly grow weaker, sicker, over the next four hours. Every time you rebut me or resist me, the effects will grow stronger. And by the time it's twice as strong as it is now, it'll already have surpassed the Plum Fragrance 59 I fed you before… That is to say…"

Staring into Xie Qingcheng's eyes, He Yu finally caught a long-awaited glimpse of mortal, human emotion—fear.

He burst out laughing. "In the conference proceedings, every time you rebut my declarations, every time you try to outdo our presentation, you'll suffer for it—maybe even break down completely."

"You—!"

“I don’t want to see you help Chen Yan oppose me,” He Yu said. “As long as you behave, nothing will happen. But if you insist on presenting your drug for Meiyu, or if you question our product, then…” He Yu pressed a soft kiss to the back of Xie Qingcheng’s ear, feeling him abruptly shiver beneath him—a shiver that set his own heart trembling. “You’ll suffer very much, Doctor Xie.”

“He Yu…!”

“Babe, at this juncture it’d be more effective to call me husband.” He leaned in and kissed his lips again, drawing away before Xie Qingcheng could retaliate.

He’d been affecting calm ever since he returned to the country. But after two months of torture, He Yu couldn’t keep on pretending anymore. His eyes were dark, dangerous wells, bordering on perverted.

He stroked Xie Qingcheng’s cheek. “That’s right, one more thing. This is a very high-tech drug. There’s a way to end its torture early—” His lips and eyes curved into a smile tinged with cruelty. “Just speak up and beg. All you need to do is say…‘He Yu, I beg you. I was wrong’—and the torment will end. It’s a beast-taming pill, after all—once you’re tamed, it won’t torment you any longer.”

With that, he opened the break room door.

“The conference will be starting in three minutes. Doctor Xie, after you.”

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Chapter 202:
To Get You Back Into My Arms

IN AN AIRY TOP-FLOOR meeting room, the conference had begun. The two teams drew lots for presentation order, and He Yu's company was going first.

Anthony gave a detailed presentation on their drug alongside a couple of his coworkers; the longform explanation required the help of multiple members of their team. The experts and competitors in the audience could ask clarifying questions or raise doubts at any time.

The New He Group had a natural advantage—Duan Wen's Mandela Syndicate were the ones who'd created Obedience Potion No. 2 in the first place. Creating an antidote for what was essentially their own drug was, to put it bluntly, an open-book exam.

Chen Man wasn't an expert in the field, but a quick glance across the audience from beneath his uniform cap was enough for him to tell that Anthony's presentation was practically flawless. Anthony gave a perfect response to every question the experts offered and every rebuttal the Meiyu researchers presented.

His brow furrowed deeper and deeper… Was there really no flaw they could pick out in their research?

"…And that concludes our presentation." Anthony finished his talk with a smile and an elegant bow toward Xiao-Wu, his latest questioner.

Sitting in the audience, He Yu watched blank-faced—he knew what kind of show must be playing out in Anthony's imagination right now.

He had learned a bit about the cousins' past from Anthony over the past three years. He understood just how much Anthony hated Xie Qingcheng, and knew that for Anthony, this presentation was a redo of that childhood talent show. There was no piano-playing prince to compete against him on this stage, and everything was neatly in Anthony's control.

Until—

“Professor Anthony, I have a question.”

Anthony’s face went gray.

He Yu’s reaction was milder, but he, too, shifted slightly at the sound of that voice. He stared at the speaker with a hint of surprise and a hint of admiration, mixed with boundless hatred and malice…and perverse intent.

Xie Qingcheng leaned back in his conference room chair, holding a pen he’d just been using to write out some calculations. His eyes were cool and calm beneath his ink-black brows, reflecting the dense research reports projected onto the big screen.

“I’ll trouble you to explain how your company acquired the data for the first item under the third heading.” His voice wasn’t loud, but it projected clearly around the room from the mic pinned to his chest.

“This data point makes a lot of sense, but it doesn’t seem to have any experimental basis. Almost as if…” His question was like a keen scalpel cutting straight to the diseased core. “As if someone gave you this information ahead of time.”

Everyone started. One by one, a few people realized he had a point, and shocked whispers spread through the crowd.

It was an unremarkable datapoint: It was such a minute detail, and the value was within a reasonable range. No one had noticed it was unsupported, and everyone assumed it was correct, an axiom which needed no proof. But once Xie Qingcheng pointed it out and the researchers put their attention to it, they all realized something was strange about this innocuous figure, unassuming as a spy.

“True, it is strange…”

“That makes everything else just a hypothesis…”

All the members of the Meiyu team knew that this discrepancy wasn’t just a case of ill-supported conjecture. He Yu’s team was constructing a solution according to Duan Wen’s formula. They had fabricated evidence for several measurements, but this minor figure had slipped their notice.

Xie Qingcheng, however, had discovered it.

Anthony met Xie Qingcheng's peach blossom eyes from across the crowd, his own flashing with hate. His face was pale as he stared as his cousin, furiously scouring his brain for how to respond. That nightmarish piano theme from *Cinema Paradiso* seemed to be playing in his ear, echoing across time from his childhood…

Once again, it was Xie Qingcheng.

Once again!

But now wasn't the time to hash out a personal grudge. Anthony quickly adjusted his facial muscles to offer the audience a carefully constructed smile.

"This…was indeed our mistake. We verified this figure during our initial experiments, but forgot to include the experimental evidence in our final presentation materials. Not to worry; this is just a minor figure. I remember the full process by which we derived it, and I can fill in the blanks live."

Anthony invited one of his assistants onstage to set up the experimental equipment.

"Professor Xie, you're so cool," said Xiao-Wu in amazement. But when he turned around, he saw that Xie Qingcheng's head was lowered with a frown and his face was pale as ice, as if he'd been struck by a sudden illness.

"Professor Xie?"

"…I'm fine." A moment later, Xie Qingcheng looked back up at the stage, but his forehead was beading with fine droplets of sweat.

He Yu hadn't lied.

He refuted Anthony's word, so the beast-taming pill He Yu had fed to him was taking effect. His blood surged unnaturally inside him, quickly spreading through his body like a venom.

His open notebook listed a few other gaps in Anthony's presentation. Xie Qingcheng bit his lip, face pale, and pushed his notebook toward Xiao-Wu. "Do you understand all of these bullet points?"

Xiao-Wu's eyes went round as bottle caps as he read the page over. "Wow…"

“Good. After Doctor Anthony finishes his response, go over these—*cough*!”

Xiao-Wu was startled. “Professor, are…are you okay…?”

“…I-I’m fine.”

This drug really was the creation of a madman. Even if he wasn’t personally resisting He Yu and his team, the mere action of asking someone else to do it on his behalf would activate the beast-taming effect.

If that was the case, there was no point in having Xiao-Wu speak for him. Xie Qingcheng gritted his teeth, catching his breath as he endured the simmering torment. “…Forget it, it’s fine. I can do the talking. I… It’ll be clearer if I do it myself.”

Xiao-Wu was clearly nervous. “But you look so pale… Why don’t you go outside and rest for a minute? The rest of us are still here.”

But Xie Qingcheng shook his head. He gathered his focus and turned his attention back toward the screen. He needed to hold out…

His abnormal behavior attracted Chen Man’s attention. “Ge, what’s going on? Are you feeling unwell?”

“…It’s just low blood sugar,” he insisted. “Give me a moment.”

Chen Man studied his face doubtfully, pressing the back of his hand to the older man’s forehead. This sensation was the last thing Xie Qingcheng could handle at this point. When Chen Man touched his forehead his entire body began to shiver, and he immediately turned his face away.

“I said I’m fine,” he ground out, clenching his jaw to bolster himself. “Focus on yourselves.” His eyes held sparks of fire and shards of ice.

No detail of this scene slipped by He Yu’s attention. Across the large conference table, he studied Xie Qingcheng’s reaction with a strange, unreadable expression. He was the only person in this meeting room who knew what was happening to Xie Qingcheng.

The drug he’d fed him could tame the wildest living creature. It was refined from his own blood, and he was the only one who could apply it properly. During his time in Australia, He Yu had used the beast-taming

pills in his personal training grounds, learning to use his blood toxin by controlling animals.

But this rose-flavored pill was a special variant, one he'd concocted during the two months Xie Qingcheng spent with Chen Man. Aside from honing its ability to control, he'd added some additional effects tailored for use on Xie Qingcheng. He hadn't wanted to resort to such methods during the conference… He wished Xie Qingcheng would read the room and forfeit on his own. But he hadn't, so…

Xie Qingcheng had forced his hand.

The drug would stop Xie Qingcheng from earning that first approval for Chen Man's sake, he thought. He'd told Xie Qingcheng not to challenge him, not to rebut him, lest the drug's control grow stronger and stronger—that if he did, he would only burn himself in the end. But Xie Qingcheng still chose to move forward, for Chen Man. He still chose to grit his teeth and bear it, to tear down his opponent's project even at the cost of his own dignity…

Was the man too righteous, or just too stupid?

Or…

Did he just care too much about his Young Master Chen, his Officer Chen?

He Yu swirled the tip of his tongue around his mouth. He continued to watch Xie Qingcheng from a distance, face frozen, as if he could train this stubborn, resolute, obstinate man with just the force of his gaze.

Xie Qingcheng…do you just have to oppose me?

Even if you lose every ounce of dignity, even if you find yourself bleeding on the ground, you still have to protect him? Protect your boyfriend Chen Yan?!

The flames of envy scorched He Yu's heart. As he watched Xie Qingcheng force himself into restraint, a perverted possessiveness seared an inferno inside him, licking its way up through his flesh. When Xie Qingcheng looked up, to shoot a glance at him through his misery, it only burned hotter. That gaze, filled with defiance, filled with iron and ice, made He Yu's own eyes go dark.

Did you have to choose this path…Xie Qingcheng?

Can you really endure it?

When Anthony finished his speech, he let out a sigh of relief, assuming it was over.

But then Xie Qingcheng's eyes slowly shifted away from He Yu's face and back to Anthony's figure. "All right," he said. "I have a second question for you."

For a moment, He Yu and Anthony were both at a loss for words.

Xie Qingcheng identified six problems with the drug He Yu's company had developed. He went through his concerns one by one without holding anything back, using simple and precise language to gradually drive Anthony into a corner.

Xie Qingcheng's performance impressed almost everyone present. He was like an expert martial artist making one precision blow after another, every move striking at Anthony's vital points—after all, how many people in the company could surpass him in the field of RN-13 research? He was its deepest victim, the little-known First Emperor.

"If you're unable to resolve the issue with this variable…" He gave a light cough. His voice was slightly hoarse and his breathing was slightly quick, but he forced down the pain of the blood toxin's control and managed to avoid showing any sign of his struggle. "…Then, Professor Anthony, your twenty-seventh conclusion also does not stand."

Anthony had nothing to say to that.

"So, up to now, there are…three points in this drug information booklet that…you have yet to…ugh…!"

His refutation of He Yu's project had grown so severe that the drug was triggered to increase its effect yet further. This was the seventh time it had happened during his relentless questioning. By now, the effect of the beast-taming pill already far exceeded that of Plum Fragrance 59…

It was too strong… The rims of Xie Qingcheng's eyes went red and he closed them for a second, disguising his groan of pain with a quiet cough. After a pause, he forged onward, his voice ragged. "Professor Anthony, you are still unable to validate these three points. If you are

unable to fill out your explanation, the drug you seek approval for today d-does not…stand its ground in terms of theoretical backing. It needs additional…refinement."

Anthony was frozen to the spot. He looked like an earthen wall stripped of paint.

The chair of the regulatory committee asked if he could provide the additional explanation live, but Xie Qingcheng's later questions had cut straight to the quick. This wasn't something Anthony could make up for in so brief a period of time.

"Professor Xie," Anthony said, forcing a smile. "If our drug were already perfect, we might as well just bring it to market directly. But now that we've received so much valuable feedback, if we are able to gain initial approval, we can fix those little issues very quickly. The committee can trust us in this."

The chair smiled back at him genially. He was correct. In its current state, their presentation scored about eighty points, far surpassing all previous attempts. They had demonstrated the He family's talent and sincerity.

"Very well. In that case, thank you, Doctor Anthony. We have gained a thorough understanding of your company's product." He looked at his watch, and stood up. Nearly two hours had passed. "Meiyu Laboratory's presentation will be next. Before we begin, let's have a short break. Please return to this room promptly in fifteen minutes' time."

He gave Anthony a warm handshake and patted his shoulder in encouragement.

Xie Qingcheng let out a sigh of relief. This mid-conference break was vital for him. His presentation was coming up; in his current state, if he couldn't catch a break, enduring it to the end would be a struggle.

Before anyone could catch him up in a conversation, he forced himself to his feet through his shivering, torturously resisting the drug's attempts to sink its claws into him as he walked toward the bathroom.

He hadn't made it very far when He Yu strode up behind him. Before Xie Qingcheng could react, He Yu's hand was on his shoulder.

“Professor Xie…”

He was tensed up to hide his weakness, and suddenly being touched by He Yu triggered an extreme instinctive reaction. He violently shoved him away.

“What are you doing…”

Now that he could see him up close, He Yu discovered that Xie Qingcheng’s forehead was covered with sweat, and his lips were shaking. He could act as if he wasn’t breaking down, but it was impossible to hide the tantalizing flush rising beneath his skin.

A man could get lost in forever in that flush. He Yu felt the flame inside him roar up into a prairie fire.

He could hardly believe that he hadn’t touched Xie Qingcheng since his return. Because of the hurts he couldn’t get over, because of his resentment over being abandoned, because of his laughable self-respect…

Once upon a time he’d wished he could trample Xie Qingcheng’s everything—his apologies, the past they shared… So he launched snide barbs at him, lashing out with all kinds of merciless things he didn’t actually mean. He wanted Xie Qingcheng so much he could die, but he still had to deride him, claiming he was worthless just because he wasn’t his.

But all he achieved in this was handing his treasure over to Chen Man, like an idiot.

Now, he had finally come around. Even if he wanted revenge against Xie Qingcheng, he didn’t need to push him away. He could just destroy everything Xie Qingcheng had given to Chen Man.

He could humiliate Xie Qingcheng even more, could make Chen Man regret being born… Really, he didn’t need to repress himself the slightest bit. He didn’t even want to care if Xie Qingcheng was with someone else or not. So what if he was with Chen Man? He Yu had no limit here. Even if he had to lower himself to an adulterous affair, he’d break the barriers of morality to be with Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng was his… Xie Qingcheng had been his in the first place!

His eyes filled with a dangerous light. Unfortunately, Xie Qingcheng, with his weakened eyesight, didn't notice the unusual expression on this degenerate gentleman's face. He wasn't on his guard.

He Yu suddenly moved in close. "Professor, can you really get on stage and give your presentation in a state like that?"

"I won't trouble you to worry about me," Xie Qingcheng replied. His face was pale. "If I have the will to do it, I'll find a way."

"Is that so?" He Yu said quietly. "How admirable. You still have such dedication to your work."

Xie Qingcheng's gaze shot daggers at him. At this point, he didn't want to waste the energy it would take to yell at him, so he only said, through a daze, "What exactly do you want?"

"Don't you know the answer?"

More and more people were leaving the conference room to stretch their legs, buy a coffee, or head to the restroom. He Yu pressed even closer to Xie Qingcheng, practically whispering in his ear. "Xie Qingcheng, you know rebutting me will make the strength of the drug increase, and yet you did it again and again. It looks like you really want to relive our most passionate moments."

He paused. "Professor Xie, I remember you being quite insatiable. Surely you must be bored with just Young Master Chen—it's about time you had a taste of something different. In consideration of our past relationship, I suppose I'm willing to sacrifice my time for the rest of the conference. We can find an empty office and catch up with each other properly…all right?"

"Fuck off!" snapped Xie Qingcheng. But as soon as the words left his mouth, he knew he'd stepped right into He Yu's trap.

He was very weak by now, but he shot down He Yu's "all right" without a second thought—and the pill's effects doubled yet again. Xie Qingcheng abruptly halted in place, sparks exploding across his eyes until he could no longer make out anything in front of him. His bones felt as if they'd been melted by magma, and he toppled forward, unable to stand.

This was the moment He Yu had been waiting for. He caught the weakened Xie Qingcheng with what looked to outsiders like absolute warmth and care.

And outsiders were looking—Xie Qingcheng could hardly hide his legs giving out, and some of the old scientists nearby noticed.

“Aiyah, what happened to Professor Xie?”

“What’s going on?”

He Yu surreptitiously locked Xie Qingcheng in his grip, talking as if everything were fine. “Don’t worry—he didn’t have breakfast, so he’s just feeling a little dizzy. I’ll take him downstairs to rest for a bit. He should recover with a hot drink.”

“Be quick. The conference will be starting again soon.”

“Of course,” He Yu said with a smile. “I’ll keep an eye on the time.”

Continuing to affect a posture of concern, he led Xie Qingcheng to the elevator. As the doors closed him off from the crowd, the elevator’s mirrored walls reflected the way his features twisted now that no one could see. That smiling face went from full sincerity to something dark, bestial, chaotic, deranged…

He studied himself in the mirror, and he studied Xie Qingcheng, failing to struggle free from his grasp. “Stop squirming. Your health is so poor. The more you struggle, the more you’ll exhaust yourself.”

Xie Qingcheng’s voice was shaking. “He Yu… You’re insane… You planned this!”

He Yu merely smiled and leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to Xie Qingcheng’s eyelid. “That’s right. I was hoping you’d realize. Be good, babygirl. It’s been nearly three years… It’s time to let your husband treat you right.”

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Chapter 203:
Fighting Dirty

THERE WERE A NUMBER of VIP break room suites on the floors below the conference room. He Yu told the staff that Xie Qingcheng was feeling unwell and needed to rest, and thus obtained a key card for one of them. He locked the door as soon as they entered.

The room was dark, each of the windows hung with thick curtains. It was only a break room, so there was no bed. The fifty-square-meter space had a large table, a sofa set, a lounge chair, and two bookcases full of medical texts and journals. An attached private bathroom rounded out the suite. It was a very proper sort of place, designed for its scholarly guests to recover their spirits or work on their materials.

Xie Qingcheng threw He Yu off, panting for breath. “Let me go… I still have…I still have to give my presentation…”

“In this sorry state?” He Yu was very close, close enough that a tilt of his head would spill his breath all over the side of Xie Qingcheng’s neck. “Professor Xie, don’t make a joke of yourself.”

“You’re trying to win without a fight…”

“So what?” said He Yu. “I was never an upright gentleman. You shouldn’t have tried to steal this project from me in the first place. Doing all this for Chen Yan…you’re simply asking for it.”

Xie Qingcheng’s breath came out panting as he stared at He Yu. The boy in front of him was a scant few inches away, but a vast ocean of time seemed to yawn between them. He knew He Yu had changed, he knew he was no longer the youth he used to be, and yet the ache of that realization still carved him down to the bone. He Yu wanted to ruin him…

If He Yu cared about him even a bit, he would never do something like this. Xie Qingcheng wasn’t incapable of accepting a loss, but he could never accept losing without a fight.

“You should at least…win on your own merit…”

“That’s for opponents who merit my respect.” He Yu slowly loosened his own tie, his face expressionless. “Do you think you’re one of them?”

There was no retort.

“You’re merely Chen Yan’s lover. I have no reason to seek a fair competition with you.”

He turned on the room’s laser TV, which connected to a livestream of the conference room on the top floor. This setup was built to allow guests to watch the conference proceedings from a private, comfortable spot in the break room—and He Yu had turned it into a tool to deride Xie Qingcheng.

Holding Xie Qingcheng down, He Yu tied him to a padded office chair. Even though he never stopped struggling, the difference in strength was far too great. He Yu barely had to exert any force to subdue him. Noting that stark difference, even he had to lament how far Xie Qingcheng had fallen. After tying his hands behind the back of the chair, he circled around to stand before him, dark eyes downturned as his gaze trailed over the man’s obstinate yet fever-flushed face.

He grabbed Xie Qingcheng by the chin and studied him closely. “Xie Qingcheng, do you remember what a good fighter you used to be? And now, you have nothing—your strength is ruined, your endurance, your arms…” His fingers traced over Xie Qingcheng’s wire-frame glasses, his palm moving cover his one working eye. “…Your eyes.”

Xie Qingcheng shivered. His one exposed eye worked as hard as it could, but failed to find focus. With He Yu covering half his face, he couldn’t see a thing, and the last of his ease sank into the darkness.

“Did you use your vulnerability to gain Chen Yan’s pity?” He Yu’s hand drifted down, letting Xie Qingcheng see his face again just moments before his fingers clamped around the heated skin of the underside of his jaw, forcing him to meet his eyes.

He Yu’s ringtone interrupted their standoff. He looked down, unlocked his phone screen, and accepted the call. “Hello? Mm, it’s fine, something came up last-minute. Just stay put and listen to Meiyu’s report.”

He hung up the call, circling back behind Xie Qingcheng. Reaching over his body, he plucked Xie Qingcheng’s phone from his pants pocket. He wasn’t surprised to find Xie Qingcheng hadn’t thought to set a passcode.

Glancing over at him, He Yu found that Xie Qingcheng's furious gaze pleased him deeply. How nostalgic…the sight of that lively expression which belonged only to him.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll help you get out of work."

"He Yu…!"

But He Yu had already pulled up a chat with Chen Man from his contacts list.

As he typed, he narrated in a monotone, "I'm feeling unwell. Please have my assistant take my place. My apologies." Then he shut off Xie Qingcheng's phone and looked up at him with a faint half smile. "How's my impression of you?"

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He hardly cared for the answer, of course; he was moving again before Xie Qingcheng could reply. Walking over to Xie Qingcheng's side, he bent down and whispered, "Now no one will be coming to disturb us. We can have a proper catch-up, yes? Xie. Ge. Oh, right—on account of the closeness of our past relationship, I'll keep the livestream on for you. Professor Xie, if you want to watch your team's research presentation, you may do so at your leisure." He amorously stroked Xie Qingcheng's cheek. "So long as you still have the energy to pay attention to it."

At this point, Xie Qingcheng had no idea what he could possibly do to end this ridiculous scene. "Didn't you say," he ground out through gritted teeth, "that you had no interest in me anymore? What is this, then? Performance art?!"

"You're hilarious. I love your deadpan humor," said He Yu. "As for my interest in you… Well, I *had* lost it, but I've spent so long looking at you that it seems to have returned a little. Is that really so inconceivable?" This was fully a lie. He Yu wanted Xie Qingcheng so bad his insides might combust.

He stared at the man tied to the chair. After two, nearly three years, Xie Qingcheng's temperament hadn't changed a bit. There was no point in gagging him. Xie Qingcheng would never yell for help, because he was too attached to his own dignity.

Meanwhile, the conference had started up again, and through the livestream, the unease of the Meiyu team was obvious. They kept dialing Xie Qingcheng's phone, but none of them could reach him. Chen Man checked his own phone, then visibly froze. He said a few words to the other members of the team, and a few minutes later, Xie Qingcheng's assistant hastily replaced him as the primary presenter.

That got a chuckle out of He Yu. "Looks like Chen Yan got the message… Xie Qingcheng, your schedule is freed up now. See? The world won't stop spinning without you."

He was talking right out of his ass. There were worlds of difference between the primary presenter and his assistant, and Xie Qingcheng could read the young scientist's timid nerves even through the screen. The rest of Meiyu stared at the door, holding on to a last wisp of hope that Xie Qingcheng would suddenly appear.

None of them could have suspected that he was just downstairs, in a private break room beneath their feet, being tied to a chair and debauched by their opponents' leader.

With a grin, He Yu slowly pulled open Xie Qingcheng's clothes, dragging his fingertips downward to peel off his slacks as Xie Qingcheng stared him down. Soon, Xie Qingcheng was left in only a pair of white underpants.

"Tsk… Look, you're wet." He Yu ran his naked gaze over Xie Qingcheng's lower body, even extending a hand to stroke the tent that was slowly beginning to rise in his underpants under the effect of the aphrodisiac. "Were you going to give your presentation like this, my dear professor? How perverted."

Xie Qingcheng had never imagined that He Yu would ever reappear —that when he did, he would find himself glaring at him in such rage. "Get the hell out… Unhand me!"

"How nostalgic," He Yu chuckled. He didn't move his hand, instead pressing the pads of his fingers against the damp, half-translucent cloth, faintly revealing the outline of the bulge underneath. The shaft was already pressing an obvious outline into the fabric. "You've been so impassive ever since we met again. I thought being with Chen Yan might've numbed your emotions, but it turns out you do still have some after all."

As he vindictively kneaded at the man's aphrodisiac-stiff cock, he drawled, "You know, Xie Qingcheng…you're the most like yourself when you're acting ferocious." Leaning forward, he placed one hand on the back of the chair, and dragged the back of one knuckle over the bridge of Xie Qingcheng's nose. "I knew you'd hate me…so hate me. I've always despised your betrayal, your scheming, your ruthlessness…"

Heedless of his vicious struggling, He Yu stripped Xie Qingcheng out of his jacket, circled behind him, and moved to tie it in an extra knot over the one already binding his wrists. But as he did, He Yu noticed something that froze him in place.

His crazed expression turned even darker. "What happened to your wrist?"

Xie Qingcheng was burning up under the effects of the drug, but He Yu's question hit him like a splash of cold water to the face, dragging him back to partial clarity.

"Why…are there cuff marks on your wrists?"

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

When he left the country for treatment over two years ago, he'd told everyone that he had suffered a great shock from the events of the naval battle, and that, given that he was already in poor health, he now needed careful treatment. To date, the director of Meiyu Hospital had kept the secret of the First Emperor. The truth of Xie Qingcheng's illness was known to no one but a few of his closest confidants. Even the leaders of Project Dreambreaker weren't aware.

It wasn't at all strange that He Yu didn't know how he'd spent the last three years. And so Xie Qingcheng offered him no answer.

He Yu saw his reluctance to speak, as if there was some embarrassing secret. He ran through a number of theories, but when he heard Chen Man's voice through the livestream one particular answer crystallized in his mind.

His voice took on an odd tone. His face was outwardly placid, but it took on a terrifying cast.

"Did Chen Yan leave those marks?"

Silence.

"You do this sort of thing with him too?"

No response. After a long wait, Xie Qingcheng slowly lifted his head. Obstinacy glinted in his eyes. There was resolution, pride, as well as… something He Yu couldn't quite parse. Disappointment? No, something deeper.

This cocktail of emotions pushed him to the point of self-destruction. "This," Xie Qingcheng enunciated, "has nothing to do with you." Each word seemed to emerge with heartless derision, but in reality they only wounded his own heart.

Genuine anger swelled through He Yu. He drew himself to his full height, looming over his bound captive. He Yu had gone so far as to tie Xie Qingcheng's two legs separately to the front legs of the chair, and the ropes

cut dark red lines over his disheveled clothing and bare skin. As he stared at him, He Yu felt an uncontrollable fire roaring through his loins. Rage mixed with jealousy, burning with enough force to ravage any ordinary person's rationality, never mind a lunatic's.

"Xie Qingcheng…I wasn't planning to be cruel to you," he muttered under his breath. "You're the one who provoked me…again and again… You're the one who looked down on me! You were asking for it… You did this to yourself!"

He was telling the truth. At first there'd been nothing more extreme on his mind than making love to Xie Qingcheng. But his mind changed as soon as he saw those marks on his wrists.

Jealousy burned hellfire-hot. The scene in He Yu's imagination drove him fully over the edge. When he looked down at Xie Qingcheng, all of perdition was contained within his eyes.

Xie Qingcheng only realized things had spiraled so completely out of control when He Yu pulled open a drawer, retrieved a box full of scientific implements, and turned his gaze toward his lower body.

He blanched. "He Yu…you…what are you doing?!"

"What am I doing?" He Yu ground his teeth. There was a vicious look on his face. "I'm going to show you that Chen Yan will never make you feel as good as I do!"

Despite Xie Qingcheng's fruitless attempts to fight back, He Yu seized his underwear and ripped the fabric clean off. Like the shed skin of a white snake, it fluttered to the carpeted ground at their feet.

He Yu's chest rose and fell, his gaze sliding up to Xie Qingcheng's cock, which strained under the effects of the drug. Suddenly exposed to the open air, its pretty shaft trembled, tip beading with dew from the torment it had endured. Hidden below it lay that warm, welcoming place that enraptured He Yu's very soul.

"He Yu…cut it out…stop it!"

The fear in Xie Qingcheng's voice couldn't have done less to convince He Yu to stop. He leaned in and dropped to a princely half kneel, but what he did next was anything but noble: He hooked one hand around

the back of Xie Qingcheng's hip, dragging him forward in the chair and lifting him up to reveal his little pink hole.

"Looks pretty tight, just like before. Is Chen Man a toothpick, or what?"

"Get…the hell off of me!"

"You're so wet. If I get off you…who's going to satisfy you?" He Yu's fingertips slid lasciviously over Xie Qingcheng's entrance. After all that lustful torment he'd endured in the conference room, he was extremely sensitive, and practically coated in slick. A furious flush spread over his face at the slightest touch of He Yu's fingers. It had been three years since he last slept with someone, after all. He only barely managed to keep a loud yelp from escaping his throat.

Even if one of his peach blossom eyes was blind and the other could barely see, when he fixed someone with a furious glare, that sharp edge was as keen as it had ever been. His expression reminded He Yu of their first time—in the Skynight Club, when Xie Qingcheng had stared at him with those same eyes, refusing to submit.

After so many years…had they simply circled back to the start?

How laughable…

How tragic!

He shut his eyes for a moment, dispelling the chill that crawled up his chest. When he opened them again, all that remained were twisted love and twisted hate, making their home on the face of a lunatic who had crawled back from the depths of hell. "However much you curse me now," he whispered, "soon you'll drop all your dignity and beg for me instead. After all, Xie-ge, I know your body. You'll be desperate for anything once I fuck you open."

"He Yu…you can't…" But his voice died in his throat as he watched He Yu pull an icy-cold string of beads from the implement box. His face went white. "You…!"

A hair-raising voice emerged from He Yu's lips. "Do you think I'll do it, or not?"

The steel beads were strung together on thin transparent cords, six to each string, arranged by type. He Yu selected a particular set. The metal balls, each the size of a walnut, glinted with a cold light as they clicked against each other in his hands.

Every clack slammed into Xie Qingcheng's heart like a hammer, a series of drumbeats sounding out his doom. He flailed against his restraints, but he had no chance of freeing himself; He Yu had bound him too tightly. His struggles only caused the ropes to dig deeper into his flesh, leaving appetizing red marks against his pale skin.

"Don't!" Xie Qingcheng's voice shook, the light in his partially-functional eye verging on despair. But He Yu acted as if he hadn't heard. He pressed Xie Qingcheng even deeper into the black leather chair, then lined one steel bead up against his wet entrance.

Xie Qingcheng turned his face away, every muscle in his body tensing as sweat rolled down his forehead. His face was pale, yet the aphrodisiac pushed waves of blood to his cheeks. "Take it… You… Get that thing away from me!"

"Professor Xie, that's not what you're saying down here," muttered He Yu. Pressing one fingertip against the steel bead threaded onto the thin cord, he slowly rubbed it against that lewd little mouth, circling, lingering just on the edge of pushing it in; an obvious threat. He teased him with the bead in outright malice, rolling it across his entrance and dragging a glistening trail of fluid after it. After taking a moment to drink in the sound of Xie Qingcheng's gasps—

"Ah!"

With a flash of icy chill, He Yu violently pushed the bead into Xie Qingcheng's damp, hot hole.

This was too humiliating; too insane. Asymmetrical eyes shot wide open. Xie Qingcheng panted deeply, arching his neck up toward the ceiling. He was bound, unable to move, like a deity fallen into a demon's den, pure white feathers scattered at his feet. The delicate column of his bared neck was a temptation to bite and tear, to drink his scalding blood.

He trembled unceasingly, in what could have been rage, humiliation, hurt… It was impossible to say. The only other reaction he showed was the

way his fingers dug into the armrests of the chair until his nails nearly embedded in the wood.

It was pure torment.

But the torment was nothing compared to the way his drugged body responded to the humiliation. The moment He Yu pushed that object inside, sensation shot up his spine like an electric current. He couldn't stop shaking, his insides pulsing rhythmically around the bead and dripping hot, erotic fluids.

Eyes lowered, He Yu ran his fingertip around the rim of that winking hole. "All those people at the conference—do you think any of them could imagine that the professor who was debating data analyses with them just moments ago…is now spreading his legs in front of his opponent, dripping wet with a man's fingers practically inside of him, desperate to be fucked by the rival company's boss?"

"I'm not…" Xie Qingcheng's voice was hoarse. Even with his face flushed and damp with sweat, his eyes misted with an amorous fog, he still clung fiercely to his rationality. "I don't…want to do these things with you! He Yu…you're a fucking madman… You're insane… *Ah!*"

He Yu's response was to stuff a second bead inside him. A shiver ran through Xie Qingcheng's entire body.

"I told you," he said, "the more you resist, the stronger the effects will become. Xie Qingcheng, you've never listened to me… You've always…"

He slowly inserted the third and fourth beads, one after the other. The contractions of Xie Qingcheng's body pulled the beads deeper and deeper. His breath quickened. "You've always sought trouble for yourself," He Yu finished quietly.

Then, he let go. The fifth bead, which he was now pushing inside Xie Qingcheng's body, was magnetic.

He Yu pushed it deep into Xie Qingcheng with his fingers. When it got close enough to the other beads already inside, the magnetized bead sucked them back with frightening speed and force.

The sudden shock slammed right into Xie Qingcheng's sensitive spot, and the force of his grip all but cracked the armrest. "Ah…" Arching his head back, he gasped in great breaths of air, tormented tears clinging to the corners of his eyes.

But He Yu's madness didn't stop. "Aiya, there's one more bead…" he muttered quietly. "It feels heavier than all the others—this should be the most exciting one to put in. Do you want it…?"

"Get out! Get the hell out!"

"Oh?" A subtle gleam flashed through He Yu's eyes, and he jerked his wrist. He was still holding the end of the nylon cord that connected the beads, and with that tug, they all slid down through Xie Qingcheng's insides.

Xie Qingcheng spasmed. He couldn't bear it. Tears rolled down his cheeks, his eyes blank; he relied on sheer muscle memory and instinct to bite his lips and keep from crying out. But his hole was gushing slick, easing the way for those invading beads and oozing lasciviously from his entrance, trickling onto the leather chair in drips and drops…

"*Tsk.* Professor, I didn't think your ass would be so greedy. Then this bead…" Looking down at him from above, He Yu ran his fingers over the final bead. He circled it around Xie Qingcheng's wet, tensing hole, then lined it up, intentionally prolonging the tingling torture before pushing it in all at once. "I'll feed this to you as well."

With a vicious burst of strength he pushed that bead as far as he could, shoving it and all the others into the deepest recesses of that convulsing passage, into Xie Qingcheng's most tender of places. Head rearing back, Xie Qingcheng trembled in abject desperation. His face twisted with the sensual torture, but he still refused to beg for mercy. He only gasped for breath like a fish out of water.

"How are you still so persistent?" He Yu straightened up and placed his hands on both sides of the chair again to examine Xie Qingcheng's sweat-damp face. His voice was flat and emotionless. "You haven't changed at all."

It was a great struggle for Xie Qingcheng to regain the focus in his shattered gaze. He panted for breath, something like anger or sorrow in his

eyes. “But you…have changed very much.”

He Yu paused, then gave him a smile. “Oh, but some things haven’t changed at all. You can experience them for yourself. For example…”

As he leaned even closer to Xie Qingcheng, he undid his zipper and pulled his pants halfway down, allowing his musky erection to spring free from its confines. Pointing upward and violently flushed, its size and appearance at full hardness was shocking to see.

Dragging Xie Qingcheng by his hair, He Yu forced him to bend forward, pressing his lips to his engorged shaft.

Xie Qingcheng turned his cheek. “Get that thing out of my face!”

“Thirty-six years old, and still so naive. You think it’s that easy?” He Yu’s smile was a twisted reflection of the full extent of his madness. “Do you think you have a choice?” He grabbed Xie Qingcheng’s cheek, forcing him to turn and face him head-on. He slapped his burning length against his face, against that skin that was so pale it seemed translucent. Breathing heavily, he rubbed the round, damp head against the ridge of Xie Qingcheng’s brow, the bridge of his nose… He dirtied that righteous countenance, smeared it with the secretions of another man’s cock, then pressed that bulging, frightfully warm tip against his lips.

“Open up.”

Xie Qingcheng said nothing. He stared silently at He Yu from beneath his fluttering lashes, but his eyes could no longer find focus.

“I told you to open up!” He Yu said darkly.

Still he didn’t move. Eyes growing darker, He Yu tightened his grip on Xie Qingcheng’s face, forcing his jaw open. He stuck two fingers in his mouth, holding open the hinge of his jaw to keep him from biting. “I want to see how far your stubbornness will go.”

It was like he was restraining a prisoner of war. Xie Qingcheng’s hands were tied, his legs were split open, and he was bound to a chair, forced to bow his head. The position alone was humiliating enough, but He Yu had to take it even further…

“Suck.”

With his engorged, musky cock in hand, he shoved it in without a hint of mercy. It plunged straight to the back of Xie Qingcheng's throat, making him gag in a wave of nausea, but He Yu only continued to thrust his hips, fucking his mouth.

"Fuck," the younger man panted as he moved his hips. "So good…"

Only once before, on the night of his twentieth birthday, had Xie Qingcheng sucked He Yu off. Now, he finally understood that if he were to actually take enough of He Yu's length into his mouth to make it feel good for him, he wouldn't be able to bear it. He Yu had been considerate back then, he realized; he'd been exercising some restraint. This time, Xie Qingcheng couldn't do anything but sit there as his throat constricted around the intrusion, sending jolts of pleasure up He Yu's spine.

Keeping one hand clamped around Xie Qingcheng's lower jaw, He Yu placed the other at the back of his head and jerked his hips forward, forcing Xie Qingcheng to deepthroat him again and again. In this position, Xie Qingcheng couldn't make a sound. The only way he could vent his disgust was through his tears. *Thank goodness my hair has fallen in my eyes,* he thought, *so this momentary weakness won't be seen.* He may have lost this young man's respect, but he wouldn't lose his last remaining bit of dignity.

He Yu's rhythm grew faster and faster as he fucked his mouth, producing a wet, squelching rhythm. After a few deep thrusts, Xie Qingcheng found himself all but unable to breathe. On the verge of suffocating him for real, He Yu finally pulled out of his mouth, his round shaft trailing sticky strings of fluid from Xie Qingcheng's lips. Like this, wet and wrapped in bulging veins, it only seemed all the more intimidating.

How strange. They were doing something so obscene, yet in He Yu's eyes Xie Qingcheng still looked so pure and righteous; the powerless way he hung his head was reminiscent of a suffering god.

Sincere rage and indescribable sympathy burst through the soil of He Yu's heart, but these contradictory emotions only expressed themselves as yet more violence. He seized Xie Qingcheng's face by the jaw and wrenched it back up. His eyes were empty, but as cold and hard as ever. There was a divine, untouchable air around him, even as unspeakable fluids clung to his lips.

“You…” Briefly mesmerized, He Yu unthinkingly stroked his bottom lip. “Xie Qingcheng, you…”

Loving words rose in He Yu’s throat, but when he spotted the marks on Xie Qingcheng’s wrists from the corner of his eye, he paused again.

He thought of Xie Qingcheng telling him he was dating Chen Man, so this had nothing to do with him; he thought of how while he had been living a life worse than death in Australia, Xie Qingcheng had been fucking around with Chen Man… The scrap of rationality He Yu almost recovered burned to ash and blew away in the wind. A bloody scarlet crawled back into his eyes.

“Your mouth is still enough to drive a person mad, Professor.” Unspoken gentle words emerged as a cold, cutting insult. He Yu stroked Xie Qingcheng’s face, his burning hot cheek, flaming with desire. He Yu knew the aphrodisiac, the humiliation, had pushed Xie Qingcheng to the brink. He could tell just by looking him in the eyes.

He Yu slowly and deliberately removed Xie Qingcheng’s glasses. With his severely degraded vision, Xie Qingcheng could barely see anything without them. His eyes lost even more of their focus.

“Xie Qingcheng…” said He Yu quietly, “you look best without glasses. I love that humiliated face on you.”

But whether He Yu praised or degraded him, Xie Qingcheng gave no reaction. After that round of extreme sexual humiliation, his self-protecting heart seemed to have sealed itself off. The drug might work on his body, might have left it still trembling and flushing after everything He Yu had done to it—but it only worked on his body.

As He Yu studied his face, his own emotional state gradually turned from maddened to resentful without any good reason. *Why did he stop resisting? Why did he stop paying attention? Why did he stop giving me any reaction—like he’s given up on me, like he’s already dead?!*

He yanked his face up, hoping he would give him some sort of reciprocation.

But Xie Qingcheng did not.

He stared at Xie Qingcheng's lips, still red and damp from giving him head. *How strange*, he thought. He had debased Xie Qingcheng so, yet the yawning void inside him only grew larger and larger. He felt like an idiot performing a monologue for himself. A surge of malice rampaged through his chest.

He Yu let that malice fuel him. "You're at your limit, aren't you?" he purred, reaching one hand down to grip Xie Qingcheng's cock while he lightly tugged at the string connecting the beads with the other. They rolled back and forth and ground together inside him. "You're so perky down here, and you're all wet… Why do you keep on pretending to be so holier-than-thou? You're not trying to preserve your chastity for that Chen bastard, are you?"

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

"You've been fucked by a man so many times—what reason do you have to hold out? Xie Qingcheng, as soon as you say, 'He Yu, I'm begging you,' the effects of the aphrodisiac will weaken. Then, I'll take you to the heights of pleasure."

He Yu's voice was like an enchantment. "Do you remember how well our bodies fit together?" he murmured in Xie Qingcheng's ear. "You used to be so frigid, but I fixed you. I made you get soaking wet for me, I fucked you until your hole couldn't stop sucking me in, I made you come screaming and clinging to me for dear life… We've done it so many times I could make you come untouched, make you come until you sprayed, lose your mind like a woman squirting… Can Chen Yan do all that?"

His fingers clamped down even tighter as he drank in the red staining Xie Qingcheng's face. His voice dropped until it was practically a rasp. "No one but me can do this to you… Beg me, Xie Qingcheng. I'll make you come. I'll let you experience that sensation again… Beg me!"

As his entreaties turned to clear commands, Xie Qingcheng's body began to tremble. It wasn't just from the drug. It was also—

The blood toxin itself!

He Yu's power must have grown again. He didn't even need to use his blood now—he only needed to be close to Xie Qingcheng to make him feel the effects of his power…

Xie Qingcheng snapped back to his senses, resisting with all he had. His face was wretched, but he still managed to focus his bloodshot eyes, and rasped out, “I won’t…”

“…What.” He Yu’s eyes grew dark.

“I won’t…beg you…just because of this…”

No response.

“He Yu, I won’t beg…this version of you… *Ahh!*”

One more act of resistance drove the effect of the drug inside him to its peak. Tingling, trembling desire flooded his entire body. Xie Qingcheng’s voice broke—in a matter of moments, he was practically moaning. Refusing to let out a sound so weak, he furiously restrained himself until all that came out was his soundless panting for air.

His breathing was so heavy he could have been dying. His chest rose and fell with one gasp and then another, over and over, until he recovered his calm. His body was soaked through with sweat…

But he’d freed himself.

He Yu looked at him with a complicated expression on his face. Despite everything, Xie Qingcheng had still escaped his blood toxin…

“I won’t…beg you…” He looked shattered. He was mumbling, nearly without his own conscious awareness. Tears of pure physiological response ran down his face. He lay there like a ragged doll, his bloodless lips opening and closing. “I won’t beg you… I won’t…beg you…”

He Yu said nothing.

I lost?

I lost to Xie Qingcheng again?

No, no… This isn’t over yet.

As he stared unblinking at the drunken flush on Xie Qingcheng’s sweaty face, he was overtaken by a powerful surge of sadism and possessiveness. A fire burned in his belly. And that raging desire compelled him onward like a curse.

“Is that so… You really won’t beg?!” He viciously spat each word.

Like a man possessed, He Yu leaned in, drinking in Xie Qingcheng's broken appearance—it only made his blood race. He shoved his fingers back into that clenching hole, fucking them in and out. He dragged the nylon cord connecting the six iron beads, making them roll back and forth inside Xie Qingcheng's body to amplify that perverted, humiliating pleasure, to make it all even harder for him to bear.

"You really won't beg?"

"I…won't…!"

"Say that again!" He snarled his words through gritted teeth.

"I…won't…ah—!"

Suddenly the beads were pulled out all at once, sending fluids splashing everywhere. Xie Qingcheng threw his neck back in a scream, his legs going stiff down to the pale tips of his toes.

"Ahhhhhh…*ahh*…! Ahh…"

The sensation was terrifying. Xie Qingcheng's entire body arched off the chair—then collapsed, completely drained, chest rising and falling hard with every breath. The six beads had been dragged out at once along with a splatter of slick. His pale pink hole opened and closed as if it was weakly panting for breath alongside him, like it was begging for something thicker and larger to fill the emptiness inside. His inner thighs were completely soaked, and the expensive black leather of the chair was also sticky with fluid.

He Yu stared at him with an unfathomable look in his eyes. His voice was quiet as a whisper as he asked again, "Are you still going to say you don't want it?"

Xie Qingcheng said nothing. The only movement was the trembling of his lips.

His health was poor; even if he had recovered some strength after two years of treatment in America, he was still a patient, and his vitality was overtaxed. An invalid who'd endured sexual torment that even a man in perfect health couldn't tolerate, who'd been ravaged by drugs and controlled by blood toxin—he was ruined half to death.

He couldn't make a sound, but his trembling lips still moved.

He Yu hesitated for a moment. He wanted badly to hear what Xie Qingcheng had to say, so he leaned in close…and, hovering right above his lips, heard the faintest wisp of sound.

"…I won't…beg you…"

Red-rimmed pupils contracted. The voice was as faint as a cotton fluff floating on the wind, but it hit as hard as a clap of thunder.

"…I won't beg…this version…of you…"

An earthquake went off in He Yu's chest. He had gone so far, yet failed to force a single plea for mercy from Xie Qingcheng. He still refused to submit…

The break room became very quiet, save for the livestream audio coming from the television. In that brief silence, He Yu heard the assistant giving their presentation mention Xie Qingcheng's name a handful of times.

He thought, *Xie Qingcheng…you really did contribute a great deal to that project.*

This man was tenacious indeed. Even when he lost everything, he could still persist in doing what he thought was right… He Yu knew that this was a quality he'd admire very much, if only Xie Qingcheng hadn't been doing this for Chen Man.

A snatch of the presentation came through to him. "Our Professor Xie led the team to confirm this figure through twelve comparative calculations…"

He looked at the Professor Xie in question, lying here before him with his legs spread wide, his hole erotically exposed; utterly helpless, yet still refusing to concede defeat. Sticky fluids still seeped from his entrance, dripping onto the black leather chair. Professor Xie's pale skin looked breakable as glass against the dark leather, and the air itself was filled with sweat and sex.

…*Forget it.*… It was impossible to tell if He Yu's heart was soft or stone. *Forget it,* he thought numbly. *Am I really going to push him to the point of no return?*

There was no way… No matter how much he hated him, he didn't actually have the heart to force him to his death.

He Yu leaned down and untied Xie Qingcheng’s legs.

Untying him was only one step, but it spent the last wisp of He Yu’s conscience. He chose to stop trying to make Xie Qingcheng beg him for mercy…but this crazed coupling was far from complete.

“I’ve lost this round, Xie Qingcheng,” he muttered. “I’ll stop forcing you.” He lifted Xie Qingcheng’s legs up, holding them to either side of his waist. It was humiliating for a respected and learned professor to be manhandled into position like this, as if he were a child being taught to use the toilet. But this, He Yu thought, was on Xie Qingcheng for no longer having a mote of strength.

“I’ll stop forcing you to beg. I’ll get you off, I’ll make you feel good…okay?” His face twisted, either out of hatred for himself or Xie Qingcheng. “I won’t force you to beg—I’ll just give it to you!”

As he spat out these words, he lined his hot, hard cock up with Xie Qingcheng’s hungrily contracting hole with one hand, sucked in a deep breath, and shoved himself inside all at once.

“Ah—!”

This brutal intrusion into the place where he was already tingling with need stretched every crease of his tender flesh to its absolute limit. Fireworks exploded in Xie Qingcheng’s eyes. Racked by pain and ecstasy at once, all he could hear was the ringing in his ears. He couldn’t even breathe.

He Yu gulped, his throat bobbing. This…was almost more than he could take…

He’d said he was showing Xie Qingcheng mercy, but in truth, he had been struggling to hold himself back as well. He didn’t give Xie Qingcheng any more time to adjust. It had been three long years since he’d last fucked this tight hole; three years since he’d tasted the addictive flavor that was Xie Qingcheng…

He was at his limit too now. As soon as he was inside, he shoved open Xie Qingcheng’s legs brutally, hauled him up by the waist, and started furiously fucking him against the chair. His hips jerked again and again, filling the break room with wet squelches and the slap of skin on skin.

Exquisite…

He Yu almost came as soon as he was inside. He slapped Xie Qingcheng on the ass, telling him to lift his legs higher to show all of himself. He possessed him, animalistic, breathing quick and shallow between low groans of ardor. Each thrust was harder than the last, as if he was trying to shove his balls inside as well, until Xie Qingcheng's waist went soft.

"Ah… Stop it… Don't… I can't…I can't take it… Ahh…"

It had been so long since he last experienced this perverse fervor—Xie Qingcheng simply couldn't take it. He cried out, words spilling from his mouth without conscious thought, his wretched noises a stark contrast to the formal academic presentation running in the background.

He should have been on that stage, giving that presentation, but Boss He of their rival company was holding him down and fucking his ass until he could do nothing but scream. Fluids splattered over the leather chair.

"You can take anything I do to you, and you love it when I'm rough with you." Plowing away until Xie Qingcheng's waist was swaying back and forth with his rhythm, He Yu lifted one of his legs and turned to press his lips to his ankle. "Xie Qingcheng, while I wasn't here…did anyone make you feel this good? You're so thirsty down there, it's like no one's fucked you in a lifetime… Xie Qingcheng…I'm going to fuck you to tears today… Fuck you full… After all, I ruined your presentation, so I ought to make it up to you somehow, right? *Ah.*…"

He was fucking Xie Qingcheng's hole with so much force that the chair couldn't take it. Puffs of air were punched out of the height adjustment mechanism, and it swayed dangerously on its legs.

Delectable. He Yu possessed him just like he had three years ago, fawned over and pleasured by those fleshy walls. He had a momentary suspicion—if Xie Qingcheng was dating Chen Man, why was he even tighter than he was when He Yu fucked him last, as if no one had touched him there in years? But that was just a passing thought. The next time Xie Qingcheng clenched around him, a jolt shot up his abdomen, and he nearly came inside.

That would have been too embarrassing for words.

Eyes darkening, He Yu pulled out of Xie Qingcheng's dripping hole, then loosened his remaining restraints. He placed the man on the wide surface of the solid wood desk, spread his legs, and shoved his eager cock back in.

"Ahn…"

"That's right, scream louder. The soundproofing here is great; no one will hear you." He Yu kept pounding into him, stroking Xie Qingcheng's ass. "Do you like that? Every time I fucked you here, you'd tremble with pleasure, bite my shoulder and beg me to fuck you as you clenched around me…just like a woman… How does it feel…? Am I making you feel good, Professor Xie?"

"Ah… Ahh…"

Caught in the pincer attack of the aphrodisiac and his own simple lust, Xie Qingcheng was helpless as He Yu dragged him into the swamp of desire. He raised an arm to cover his eyes, unwilling to watch, to see what was happening to him.

But He Yu pulled his hand away without pausing the movement of his hips for a moment, and interlaced their fingers. Every in and out dragged with it a sheen of sticky fluid, half shoved back inside with the next thrust while the rest dripped salaciously down his thighs, pooling on the dark walnut table.

"How lewd, Xie Qingcheng… Your hole is the sexiest, the best at servicing men… Fuck…" As a new contraction around his cock stimulated him, He Yu's face became a twisted mask of lust as he slammed into Xie Qingcheng's most sensitive spot—something he had never forgotten, and never would forget as long as he lived. They would drown together in the quagmire of lust. "Can you take it…if I fuck you like this? Is it so good you're gonna cry?"

Xie Qingcheng trembled along with He Yu's movements. The only time he'd ever experienced anything like ecstasy was when he was with He Yu.

He really wanted to tell He Yu that for the longest time, he only felt like a normal person when they were making love. Then he could love, then he could desire, then he could feel the need to be close to someone; then he

would press himself against another person, would crave more. Only when he reached release together with He Yu could he feel true pleasure, could he want to come so hard he screamed.

But these were words he could no longer say. He hadn't changed; he'd stayed in place, but He Yu was no longer the same.

He wasn't dating Chen Man, but He Yu had been making love with Xie Lishen for the past three years. The cock fucking him right now had seared its fiery brand into Xie Lishen's body…and Xie Lishen was a gay man in the first place. Doubtless he cooperated better with He Yu in bed, doubtless he would openly pant and moan beneath him—get He Yu addicted, so they'd do it again and again.

His numbed heart was racked with pain once more. He didn't know why He Yu was fucking him so insatiably still. Didn't he tell him he was an old cripple? A frigid, boring old man, and one who betrayed him at that… An utter failure without a single redeeming trait. So why was he still so enraptured?

Did he just want to humiliate him? Was it because he hadn't had a taste in too long, so he thought it would be a good bit of novelty? Or was it just that He Yu wanted to see him cry…wanted to stain his face with tears…

Amid his distraction, He Yu picked him up and pushed him down into the carpet, lifting one of his legs to enter him from the side. His asshole continued to gush with slick, a natural lubricant for their coupling. He kept on slamming his sweet spot, hit the deepest point inside him again and again, but Xie Qingcheng refused to shed a single tear, even as a physiological response. Utterly dazed, he glanced at He Yu's face, but all he could see was a great blur. He couldn't make out any trace of love or hate in his expression, only hear his low groans of pleasure, ringing out as if they'd been repressed for a very long time.

Unable to stop himself, he let out a moan. "Ahh…*ahh*…"

The voice of He Yu sounded in his ear. "Xie Qingcheng, I'm the one fucking you… I'm the only one who can fuck you, get it? I'm the only one who can make you like this!"

A voice cruel, yet desperate.

His thrusts grew faster and faster, harder and harder. Xie Qingcheng practically felt his soul leave his body, all color bleeding from his vision until everything turned white. He let out a scream, his voice a mournful wail. “Ah… He Yu… Ahh—!”

Abruptly, He Yu came inside him. That familiar stimulation—that familiar horror—pushed him to the peak of desire. In the same moment He Yu reached his climax with a low snarl, he too was forced over the edge: spilling his seed with each thrust as his entrance clamped down on He Yu’s pulsating cock, like a reunited lover begging for their partner’s love and come.

In this moment, their bodies were more honest than their words.

He Yu didn’t want to stop—Xie Qingcheng had still absolutely refused to cry. Even as his eyelashes grew damp, he craned his head, forcing the tears back down and refusing to let them fall. Panting heavily, He Yu pulled out of Xie Qingcheng’s trembling hole, eyes dark as he watched his spend dribble out.

Then, dragging Xie Qingcheng by the hair, he maneuvered him over to the floor-to-ceiling windows and threw him to the ground. His ass was lifted high in the air as his dazed face was positioned to see the busy traffic hurrying along below. “I said, I’m not gonna stop until I fuck you to tears.”

Xie Qingcheng was forced to sprawl against the ground in the position of a dog in heat, legs spread wide, one flushed cheek pressed against chilly glass. He Yu roughly scooped up a dribble of semen with his fingers and shoved it back inside, before following it with his cock.

“Ah…!” Xie Qingcheng’s mind went blank. Not a single thought was left in his head, nothing except for the terrifying pleasure of being taken again while still feeling the aftershocks of his last orgasm.

Hips working tirelessly, He Yu slapped against the reddened skin of his rear. Across from them was a forest of skyscrapers, and below was an endless flow of vehicles and pedestrians. Kneeling in front of the giant window with He Yu plowing into him from behind, Xie Qingcheng was utterly exposed with nowhere to hide. Even though he knew passersby couldn’t necessarily see into these windows from the outside, the mortifying fear that washed over him was no different than if he were actually being humiliated in front of an audience of millions.

“Scream for me.” He Yu laid his fingers along those marks on Xie Qingcheng’s wrist and clamped down, leaving his own fingerprints over the faded bruises. He fucked him with all of his strength. “Scream for me!”

Xie Qingcheng shook his head in despair, biting his lips until they bled. The more He Yu tried to force him, the more he refused to comply. In his daze, Xie Qingcheng felt He Yu pause for a moment to fiddle with something behind him, before he heard his own voice letting out a hoarse, dazed moan.

This… What was this? For a moment, Xie Qingcheng thought he was having a mental break, crying out without his own conscious awareness. It took a moment for him to comprehend what was happening. His head pivoted to stare at the television in horror—

Just now, He Yu had changed the feed on the television, switching the livestream of the conference presentation to an app broadcasting a video from his phone. And the contents of that video… The contents of that video were…

“Can you not see it properly? Don’t worry, I can help you get a better look.”

Without pulling out, He Yu picked him up like he was helping a toddler on the toilet, thrusting up into him as he walked. It was a very taxing position, but He Yu was in his prime, so it was no difficulty for him. Rather, it was Xie Qingcheng who lost his footing, the pull of gravity only forcing the hot, florid erection even deeper inside as it pumped between his cheeks.

Breath coming in puffs, movements frenzied, He Yu fucked him hard as he shoved him against the television screen, pushing into the deepest spot inside him. A piteous moan emerged from Xie Qingcheng, his voice faint but clearly teetering on the verge of collapse.

There it was… On the television was the scene of him riding He Yu in his car on the day of his birthday!

He could scarcely believe it. He had no idea when He Yu had taken this video; he could only watch in horror as he bounced up and down on He Yu’s lap in the recording, kissing him passionately; he could only listen to the soundtrack of their gasps and broken moans. He Yu was fucking him,

while at the same time a video of one of their past trysts played out in front of them. The erotic sounds echoed in his ears…

This finally broke Xie Qingcheng. “He Yu…you animal… Where did you…where did you get this thing?! You’re a fucking… Ah—!”

He Yu slammed into him hard; in the same moment, the Xie Qingcheng in the three-year-old video let out an erotic cry. The sex tape and the man beneath him finally became one again.

“This thing?” he murmured as he plowed into the molten-soft professor in his arms. “I got it from Duan Wen, of course. Wei Rong had a private investigator film it, and she deleted it, but Duan Wen kept a copy on his computer. When I found out, he gave me a copy… What a great film… When I was in Australia, I’d get off to it almost every single night—otherwise I couldn’t sleep…”

A vague, fuzzy thought crossed Xie Qingcheng’s mind—wasn’t He Yu fucking Xie Lishen every night?

But even if he’d had the presence of mind to ask, he wasn’t given the chance to. He Yu started fucking him harder and harder. He shoved him against the warm screen, his cheek pressed to the obscene images of roiling flesh, surrounded by the impossible-to-ignore soundtrack of their previous copulation.

This was insane…

An obscene noise rang out every time He Yu rolled his hips forward to slap into his body. He Yu sank himself into Xie Qingcheng’s flesh so fervently it was like he wanted to suck him dry, wanted to drag Xie Qingcheng down into the abyss—so they might become nothing more than two beasts ensnared in the same net of primal passion.

“Fuck…you’re really asking for it… You get wetter the more I fuck you; are you enjoying it? Hm? How do you like the sex tape?”

He Yu had thrust into him, hot and wild, hundreds of times by now. He pressed his burning, rock-solid shaft against a specific spot inside him, rubbing his cock back and forth as it pulsed and throbbed. “Just you wait,” he purred into the side of Xie Qingcheng’s neck, his voice as heated and turbid as his body. “I have something even better for you.”

Xie Qingcheng frowned, panting low. He Yu must be about to come again, he thought, and he tried to squirm into a different position. He knew he couldn't escape—he didn't waste his energy attempting to get away, nor did he try begging He Yu not to come inside. He just wanted to make it a little better for himself, wanted He Yu not to come right against his sensitive spot, so he wouldn't be left in such a sorry state.

But He Yu saw through him. Clamping his hands around his waist, he dragged Xie Qingcheng back, pinning him with his sweaty bulk until he couldn't squirm away. He pressed his lips to Xie Qingcheng's ear, whispering over the sounds of their own passionate declarations in the background. "Stay still. You're refusing to cry, right? So just spread your legs and enjoy it."

His bedroom etiquette had always been terrible, but his hatred was dragging it even deeper into the dirt. He furiously hated and furiously loved Xie Qingcheng all at once, and these tempestuous opposites amplified each other to push him to the extremes of infatuation and the extremes of humiliation.

"Xie Qingcheng… For those three years in Australia, this was the only thing I could watch, day and night… But you were screwing around with Chen Yan… You can't blame me for bullying you…"

He locked an arm around Xie Qingcheng, forcing him to sprawl out with his legs spread. His swollen cock pressed against Xie Qingcheng's prostate. Xie Qingcheng knew there was no escape, so he could only bite his lips, screw his face, and brace himself for what was coming.

He had never been able to take the sensation of He Yu coming inside, but as long as he put his full focus on enduring it, he should be able to—

"Ah… *Aaaaaaah…!*"

Before Xie Qingcheng could finish his thought, his eyes went wide, and he was screaming. With a final violent thrust, He Yu held him down with his full weight, hips jerking as he released inside him.

That…that wasn't come. That burning heat was far more terrifying than someone coming inside him. This was something he never could have expected, and it sent him into a complete breakdown…

It was piss…!

With far more force than any spurt of come, the boiling stream struck him right in his prostate—He Yu had pissed inside him.

Xie Qingcheng's jaw dropped open and, wretchedly, he tried to escape. But the liquid only rushed into him more and more, every drop battering his sensitive inner walls, hotter and stronger than come… Going weak in the knees, he shivered in a combination of fearsome pleasure and brutal humiliation.

"Ahh—! He Yu…ah…"

His legs gave out. Having anticipated this, He Yu grabbed his waist and pushed him down onto the carpet, ignoring his struggles and pleas, even ignoring his tragic state as he finally began to cry. Deeper and more furiously, he jetted torrid fluids into Xie Qingcheng's hole. That hot, forceful stream pummeled his fragile prostate without end—Xie Qingcheng absolutely couldn't take it. His entire body shivered and twitched, but his entrance couldn't help but clench again and again in time with He Yu's continued thrusts.

"Ah… Ah…!"

"I'll fuck you to death… Fuck… You slut… You whore!" He Yu snarled into his ear. He sounded crazed. He didn't actually think Xie Qingcheng was a slut—in the heat of the moment, he'd say anything and everything to provoke him, and he hardly knew what was coming out of his mouth. As he employed a male animal's most primitive method of marking its territory, Xie Qingcheng tensed and spasmed beneath him as they both reached a furious climax. "You came so much from being fucked like that—feels amazing, doesn't it? Fuck, is this how desperate you are for a man? I'll give it all to you… I'll fucking teach you to seduce someone else… I'll teach you to sleep with someone else!"

Too full…too much… The physical stimulation was enough to make Xie Qingcheng's eyes roll back in his head. But the psychological pain cut even deeper.

Fortunately, he'd already been pushed to his absolute limit, and He Yu's final hateful derision didn't reach his ears. His consciousness slowly floated far away from his soaked, twitching body, his tattooed wrist dropping to the ground like that of a broken doll—a doll saturated with lust,

hatred, and love, pinned beneath He Yu and forced to endure the young man's piping hot piss followed by spurt after spurt of come…

He felt as if his belly was about to swell with the volume of it. He was on the verge of madness, he was already losing his mind…

He Yu didn't pull out of Xie Qingcheng even after he'd released all his spend. His expression was dark, lunatic, crazed…a thousand emotions twisted together into an impenetrable mask.

"You still cried, in the end," the lunatic panted, stroking Xie Qingcheng's tearstained cheek. His head had cleared a little at last, but it would be a reach to call him normal. It was impossible to tell if the look in his eyes was satisfaction, pain, or a warped infatuation. "Look. You cried for me in the end, Xie Qingcheng."

That expression was downright malefic, yet the set of his brow seemed to hide eons of sorrow, despondency, jealousy, and hurt. "In the last three years…did you cry for me, even once?"

He touched Xie Qingcheng's burning red skin, knowing that he would never get a response from those thin, trembling lips again. But all he did was bow his waist until they were forehead to forehead. "These three years," he murmured, in something close to despair, "did you cry for me? Even just once…"

Holding him, he kissed his sweat-damp cheek, the side of his neck. But Xie Qingcheng could no longer hear a word he said. The instant that first tear rolled free from the corner of his eye, he had lost consciousness entirely, falling into a dead oblivion wrought of extreme ecstasy and extreme humiliation.

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Chapter 204:
And Then I'll Drag You Back to My Lair

WHEN XIE QINGCHENG WOKE again, he was lying on an unfamiliar bed. The bedroom he was in was decorated in a minimalistic style, but filled with numerous, obvious signs of luxury. A thick, plush carpet coated the floor, and the velvet curtains were pulled tight, making it impossible to tell if it was bright or dark outside. The digital clock at the head of the bed was the only thing dutifully reporting the time: 1t was 11:00 p.m., late at night.

He tried to get out of bed, but his entire body ached in protest. At most he could manage to force himself into a seated position so he could take stock of his surroundings. His clothes and phone were placed nearby, and someone had cleaned him up. There was even a box of fever medication on the bedside table, and an IV sticking out of his hand.

Xie Qingcheng scrubbed a hand across his feverish face. Then, ignoring the clattering of the IV stand, he reached across the bed to grab his phone. Finding that the bed was too wide and the IV line wasn't long enough, he pulled the needle out of his hand—he had given up on his own health by now.

"Don't bother. There's no signal here." A voice abruptly spoke up from the other side of the room.

The bedroom was large and dark, and Xie Qingcheng's eyesight was terrible without his glasses. He had failed to notice that a person was sitting in an unlit corner.

Dressed in a black collared shirt, He Yu strolled out of the shadows and over to his bedside. "This is my place."

Silence.

"The conference is over." And though he didn't want to hear the rest, He Yu was already telling him cruelly: "Apologies, Xie Qingcheng, but I received the first approval."

"…I owe you my congratulations."

Despite the dizziness and the ringing in his ears, despite the indescribably complex emotions he felt, Xie Qingcheng moved to get out of bed as soon as he dressed himself. But He Yu came to stop him.

“Don’t move. You’re suffering severe inflammation, and you need to be on an IV drip for three days,” said He Yu. “You’d best stay here. You don’t want to appear before Chen Man and Xie Xue in this sorry state, do you?”

“There’s no need for them to see anything,” Xie Qingcheng said through gritted teeth. “I can take care of myself.”

“And how do you plan to do that? You can barely move an inch without a struggle. Why don’t I look after you—”

He was cut off by a direct and piercing glare. Before, there had been guilt in Xie Qingcheng’s gaze as it looked at him, but that guilt had been dashed to pieces and sunk beneath the surface. His eyes were as cold as ice, with only the barest tinge of sorrow hidden in the deepest depths. “Mr. He, I’m not broke,” he replied hoarsely. “I can afford a hotel; I can afford medicine; I can afford delivery. I don’t need you to work as a nurse for free.”

He Yu was silent for a moment, then let out a chuckle. “You’re still so harsh… How does it work between you and Chen Man, anyway? How does he put up with your mouth?”

Xie Qingcheng averted his face and didn’t say a word. He made another attempt to get up and leave, but between the pain in his legs and the pain in his waist, something collapsed. By the time he realized what happened, He Yu had already shoved him back onto the bed.

“I told you, you should take a few days to recuperate. Don’t go anywhere.”

Recuperate…? What a joke.

His condition was terminal. He had finally seen some improvement after two years of treatment, added a few years to his life expectancy—only to end up being tormented like this. The marks from his treatment had been mistaken for evidence that he was having an affair with Chen Man, and the things He Yu had done in the conference venue made him feel degraded just recalling them.

He felt endless guilt and nostalgia for He Yu. Now the person he missed so much had returned, only to shatter him. Xie Qingcheng knew he owed He Yu a life debt as heavy as a mountain. Between that and his past affections, he had no grounds on which to hate him, no matter what He Yu did. Still, he had sealed his heart off completely. All his softest sentiments were enclosed within solid walls of stone, unable to escape ever again.

“Let me go,” he said, quietly, numbly.

“Professor Xie,” He Yu retorted, “I just want you to stay put and finish your IV treatment.”

“Save it for yourself. I don’t need it.”

When he tried to get up again, though, He Yu put a hand on his shoulder, grabbed his wrist, and stabbed the saline IV back in himself. The ice-cold needle didn’t exactly hurt as it was buried into his vein, but the sensation was extremely unpleasant nonetheless. Xie Qingcheng groaned under his breath, but even as he began to struggle, He Yu continued to brutally pierce the metal into his flesh. Chilling anti-inflammatory medicine dripped into his body.

“Don’t squirm.” He Yu held down his disobedient hands as he worked, casting a sideways glance at the crimson seeping back upward into the tube. He was bloodthirsty by nature, but for some reason, he still felt uncomfortable at the sight of Xie Qingcheng’s blood. “Be good. Don’t make more trouble for yourself.”

But Xie Qingcheng refused to listen. More and more blood flowed out as he struggled, rising straight up the transparent IV line. There was a fierce look in his eyes: a beast refusing to be tamed even unto death. “And what are you going to do to me if I refuse treatment?” he said quietly.

“A good question.” He Yu looked down at him, taking in his stubborn resistance. “But I don’t think you need to ask, Doctor Xie—you know better than anyone how to restrain a lunatic who only wants to die.”

He said nothing.

“You’ve seen it yourself—that’s what they did to me when I was young. And now you’re lying in my bed.”

A scene from of He Yu’s childhood flashed through Xie Qingcheng’s head in an instant—

Don’t! Don’t tie me up! Let me out! Let me out! I don’t want treatment… I don’t want… Daddy… Mommy! Let go of me—!

A special bed with hidden restraints. The parents who tied their sick child to his bed for treatment during one of his flare-ups, saying it was for his own good. The needles stabbing into flesh.

Xie Qingcheng understood He Yu’s intentions at once. His already bloodless face grew even paler. He shoved He Yu away and tried to rise, but in his current state, it was no contest. He Yu pressed the release button and pulled out the black restraints, the kind used to tie down mentally ill patients. Heedless of Xie Qingcheng’s struggles, he grabbed his wrists and shackled him to the bed frame, securely anchored in place.

These restraints were meant to keep patients from injuring themselves during flare-ups; but of course, they could also be used to force uncooperative patients to submit to treatment.

As they struggled, He Yu panted, “I never thought that one day I’d be using these restraints to make you cooperate with an IV—I thought you were the doctor. Shouldn’t you know that the treatment is for your own good?”

With the restraints in place, Xie Qingcheng could no longer move his arms. The icy saline slowly forced its way into his veins, finally pushing the blood back in. Xie Qingcheng drew in heavy breaths. He was sensitive enough to feel the saline entering his body, sending a chill through his veins. It was so cold…

The rate of IV flow increased with a painful, tingling sensation.

“Don’t go anywhere for the next few days. While I’m around, I’ll take care of you—give you your meds and your injections,” He Yu said quietly, staring at his cold, pale face. “When I’m not around, doctors will do it on my behalf. Don’t worry, I already used your phone to inform the people around you in your usual tone of voice… Once you’ve recovered, I’ll personally bring you home.”

Everything he said was focused on treatment, but the overall effect was hair-raising. Not to mention the look in He Yu’s eyes, hovering so close

to his face—so many emotions swirled in those eyes that Xie Qingcheng couldn’t parse them.

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Walking to the head of the bed, He Yu pressed a kiss to Xie Qingcheng's brow. "It's my fault this happened, so I'll take responsibility to the end."

Xie Qingcheng couldn't move an inch. He was supposed to take his special medication on a set schedule. If he really stayed here for multiple days just to treat a fever, he'd be forced into withdrawal, and it would cause terrible damage to his health. His doctors in America had said that if he wanted to preserve his hard-earned results, he absolutely could not stop taking his medication.

But if Xie Qingcheng wanted He Yu to take him home, he would have to tell him the truth about his condition—tell him that he had never stopped using RN-13, tell him about all the time he spent carrying out further experimentation on himself in an attempt to save Qin Rongbei…

Tell him everything.

He stared into He Yu's eyes. He had once been a stoic, masculine man, firm as steel, and even now he still retained that essential temperament. Explaining himself to the person who had just viciously humiliated him was no different in his eyes than pleading for mercy.

He couldn't do it.

He was already dead inside, burnt out ashes all that remained of his heart. After all he had suffered, he had essentially lost the desire to seek salvation.

In the end, Xie Qingcheng just closed his eyes. Only after the warmth of He Yu's lips left his forehead did he speak, his quiet voice expressing the farce of all this. "He Yu, do you still remember…back in the villa…who it was who loosened your restraints?"

He Yu paused. Of course he remembered—

He had lost his mind in a flare-up that year, and He Jiwei and Lü Zhishu had followed his former doctor's instructions to forcibly tie him to the bed, the heavy black restraints digging into his small, child's body.

He sobbed and wailed like a wolf cub in a trap, blood beading where the restraints scraped his skin. "I'm not sick… Let me go… Don't tie me up

like a criminal! It hurts… Mommy! Daddy! It hurts… Don't tie me up… Don't… Hold me… Someone hold me…"

His head was a mess, his entire world a fuzzy blur. He didn't know what was happening around him, what the adults were discussing or arguing over. When he finally recovered his senses, he had already been released from the mental ward restraints. His sobbing, bleeding form was held in a man's warm, faintly disinfectant-scented embrace.

He Yu looked up, tears streaming down his face…

He couldn't clearly see the man's face. The hurt welled up all at once, and yet there was a great comfort at the same time. He subconsciously reached out his small, trembling arms to wrap them around the man's neck.

"Please…don't tie me up…" the sickly child had sobbed, his mangled body curling up in the man's embrace as he closed his eyes in exhaustion.

He Yu was silent as he remembered it. But in the end, he simply said, "My apologies, Xie Qingcheng. I no longer recall. I took a round trip through the gates of hell before I returned from my trial at sea. I no longer remember many things."

Despite his words, he still took Xie Qingcheng's icy, tied-up hand, and slowly turned down the flow rate of the IV.

"I lost many things in that battle…and now I'm left with nothing at all. But it doesn't matter. I don't want anything in the first place, as long as you hate me," he said. "Hate me, Xie Qingcheng. You fell in love with Chen Yan, and now you hate me to the core. But I won in the end—because hate lasts much longer than love." He Yu was whispering in his ear now. "Xie-ge, let me enjoy the full force of your hatred for these few days. Once you've recovered, I'll personally bring you back home, and then…

"Let's never see each other again."

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THE STORY CONTINUES IN

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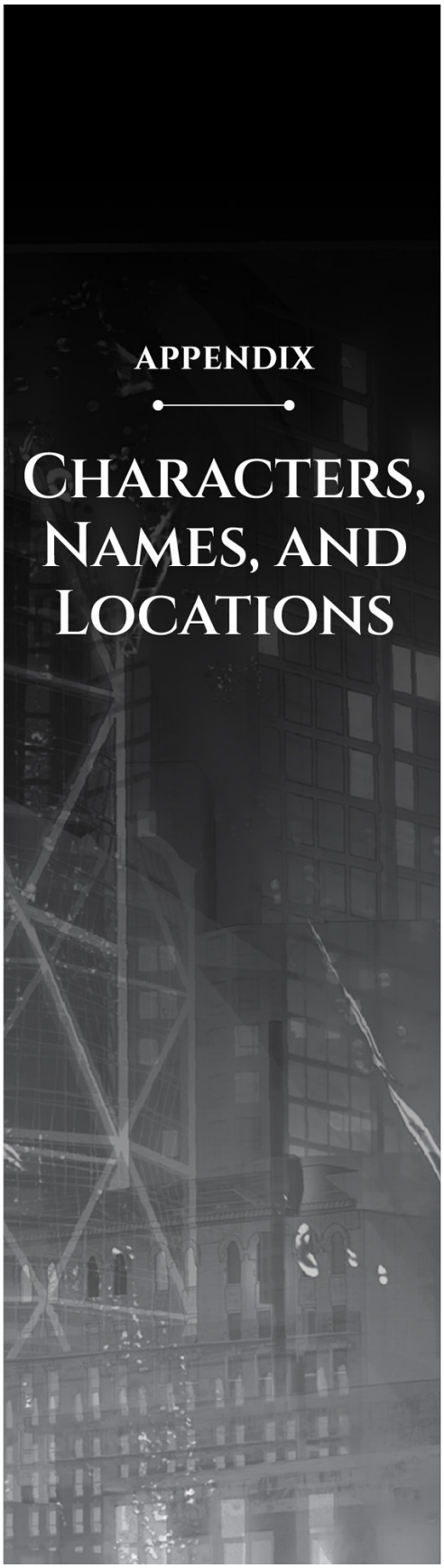

APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

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CHARACTERS

Main Characters

HE YU : A pharmaceutical company heir in his early twenties with a rare mental illness.

XIE QINGCHENG : He Yu's former doctor, who left teaching at medical school due to his failing health.

Supporting Characters

XIE XUE : Xie Qingcheng's younger sister, and a lecturer at He Yu's university.

WEI DONGHENG : Xie Xue's husband, a Huzhou University student from a wealthy family.

CHEN YAN : A police officer and family friend of Xie Qingcheng. Nicknamed "Chen Man."

QIN CIYAN : Xie Qingcheng's former colleague, who was killed by the angry son of a patient.

LI RUOQIU : Xie Qingcheng's ex-wife.

LÜ ZHISHU : He Yu's mother, a wealthy businesswoman.

HE JIWEI : He Yu's father, a wealthy businessman who was often away from home. Deceased.

HUANG ZHILONG : A powerful entertainment executive.

ZHENG JINGFENG : A veteran criminal investigator and former colleague of Xie Qingcheng's parents.

DUAN WEN : A mysterious figure working in the shadows.

ANTHONY: A doctor with ties to Duan Wen employed as He Yu's personal physician.

Name Guide

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

DA-: A prefix meaning “big” or “elder,” which can be added before titles for elders, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

DI/DIDI: A word meaning “younger brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

GE/GEGE: A word meaning “older brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

LAO-: A prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

LAOSHI: A word meaning “teacher” that can be used to refer to any educator, often in deference. Can also be attached to someone’s name as a suffix.

LAOBAN: A word meaning “boss” that can be used to refer to one’s superior or the proprietor of a business. Can also be attached to someone’s name as a suffix.

SAOZI/-SAO: A word meaning “elder brother’s wife.” It can be used to address the wife (or informally, girlfriend) of an unrelated male peer.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

XUEZHANG: Older male classmate.

XUEDI: Younger male classmate.

XUEJIE: Older female classmate.

XUEMEI: Younger female classmate.

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APPENDIX

Glossary

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GLOSSARY

BAIDU: A Chinese tech company that provides a variety of online services. Its search engine, Baidu Search, and its online encyclopedia, Baidu Baike, are comparable in popularity to Google and Wikipedia in other countries.

EYES: Descriptions like “almond eyes” or “peach-blossom eyes” refer to eye shape. Almond eyes have a balanced shape, like that of an almond, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

FACE: *Mianzi* (　), generally translated as “face,” is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, “having face” refers to having a good reputation, and “losing face” refers to having one’s reputation hurt. Meanwhile, “giving face” means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while “not wanting face” implies that a person is acting so poorly or shamelessly that they clearly don’t care about their reputation at all. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

JADE: Jade is a semi-precious mineral with a long history of ornamental and functional usage in China. The word “jade” can refer to two distinct minerals, nephrite and jadeite, which both range in color from white to gray to a wide spectrum of greens.

UNIVERSITIES AND CLASS STRUCTURE: In Chinese universities, students are assigned to a class of students in their major. Each class takes their major courses together for the duration of their university career.

WECHAT: A Chinese instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment app ubiquitous in modern Chinese society. People use its text, call, and voice message functions for both personal and business communications. Many vendors in China prefer its mobile payment capabilities to cash.

WEIBO: A popular Chinese microblogging social media platform similar to Twitter.

XUEBA: (　) Literally “academic tyrant,” this is a slang term for high-achieving students. Usually complimentary.

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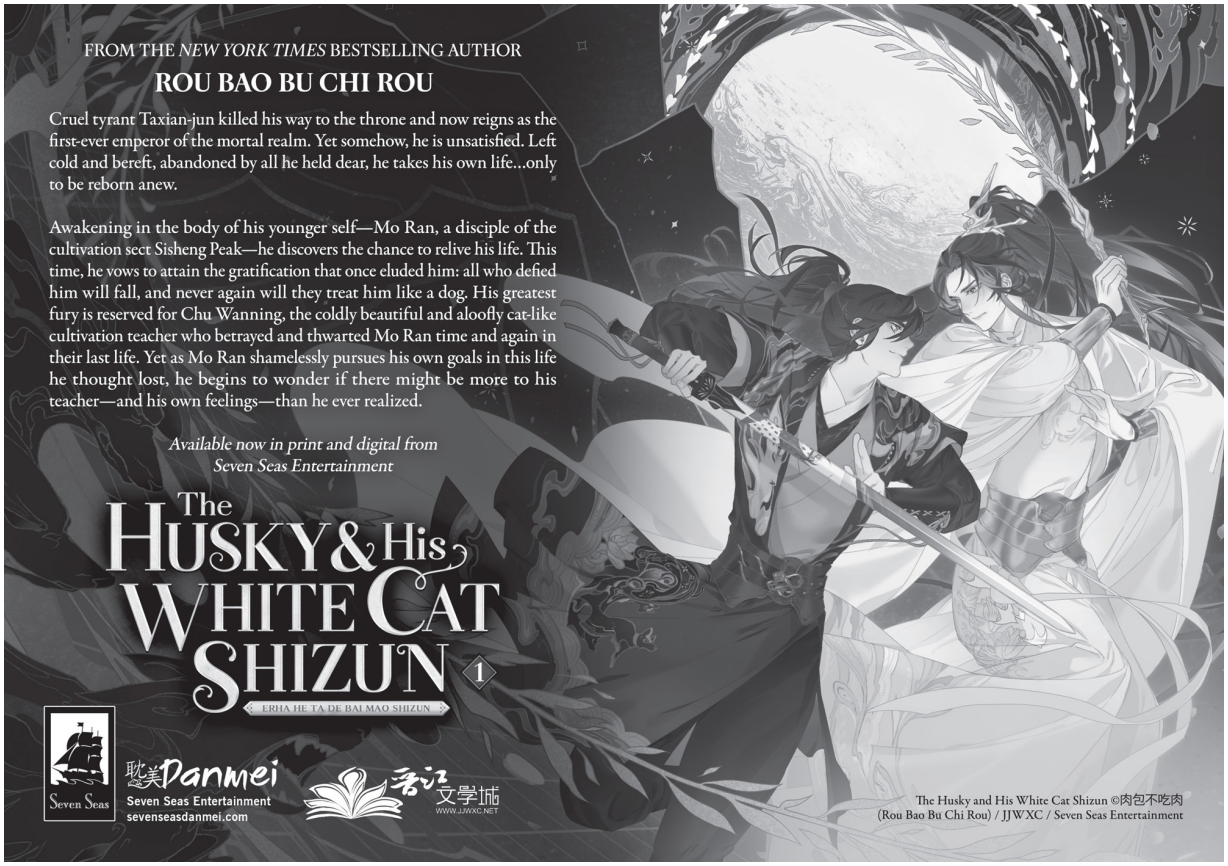
FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
Cruel tyrant Taxian-jun killed his way to the throne and now reigns as the first-ever emperor of the mortal realm. Yet somehow, he is unsatisfied. Left cold and bereft, abandoned by all he held dear, he takes his own life...only to be reborn anew.
Awakening in the body of his younger self—Mo Ran, a disciple of the cultivation sect Sisheng Peak—he discovers the chance to relive his life. This time, he vows to attain the gratification that once eluded him: all who defied him will fall, and never again will they treat him like a dog. His greatest fury is reserved for Chu Wanning, the coldly beautiful and aloofly cat-like cultivation teacher who betrayed and thwarted Mo Ran time and again in their last life. Yet as Mo Ran shamelessly pursues his own goals in this life he thought lost, he begins to wonder if there might be more to his teacher—and his own feelings—than he ever realized.
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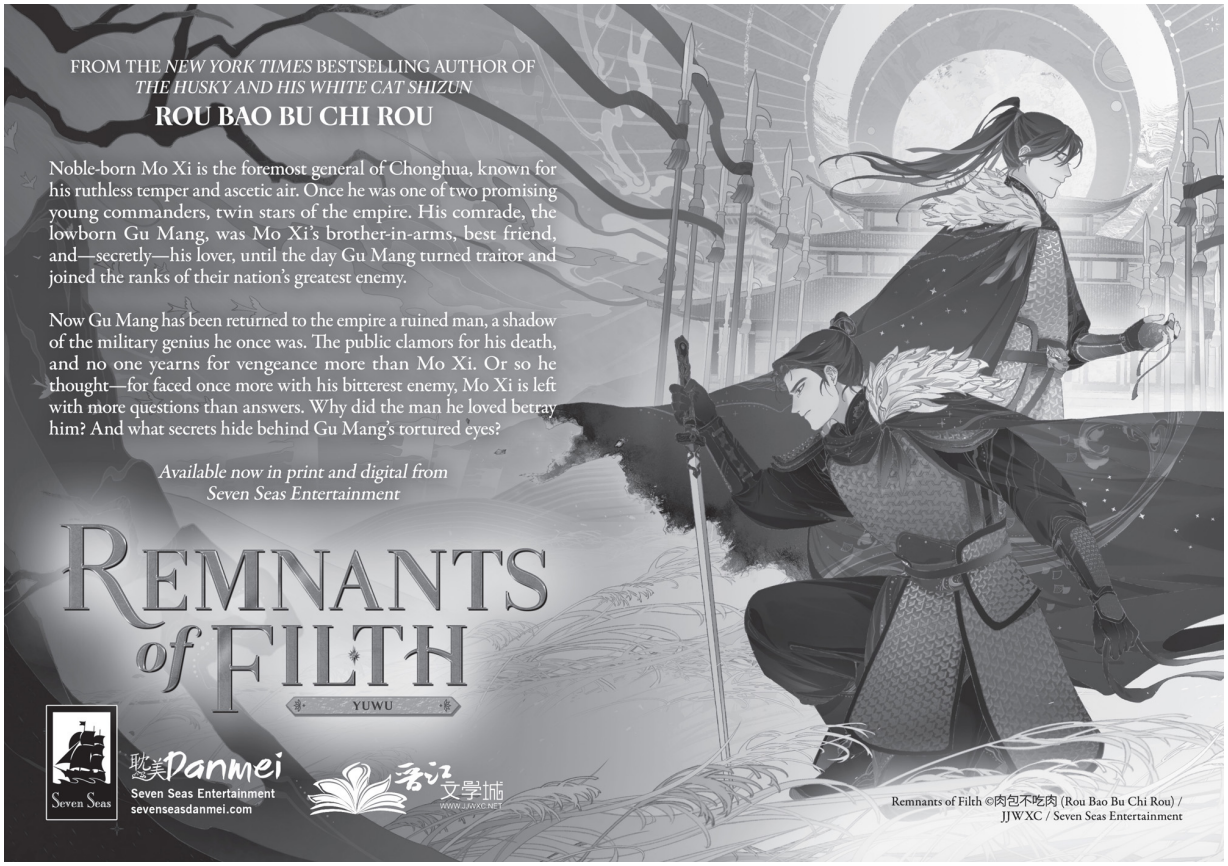
FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE HUSKY AND HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN
ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
Noble-born Mo Xi is the foremost general of Chonghua, known for his ruthless temper and ascetic air. Once he was one of two promising young commanders, twin stars of the empire. His comrade, the lowborn Gu Mang, was Mo Xi's brother-in-arms, best friend, and—secretly—his lover, until the day Gu Mang turned traitor and joined the ranks of their nation's greatest enemy.
Now Gu Mang has been returned to the empire a ruined man, a shadow of the military genius he once was. The public clamors for his death, and no one yearns for vengeance more than Mo Xi. Or so he thought—for faced once more with his bitterest enemy, Mo Xi is left with more questions than answers. Why did the man he loved betray him? And what secrets hide behind Gu Mang's tortured eyes?
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Footnotes

Chapter 188: The Truth Left Behind

[1] In China, men must be twenty-two years old before they can apply for a marriage license. (The legal age for women is twenty.)

Chapter 191: Do You Think I Will Hate You?

[2] Yeye means “grandfather,” and can also be used to address an unrelated elderly man.

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感谢阅读， 回忆长伴。

"Thank you for reading,
may these memories
stay with you forever."

- Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat

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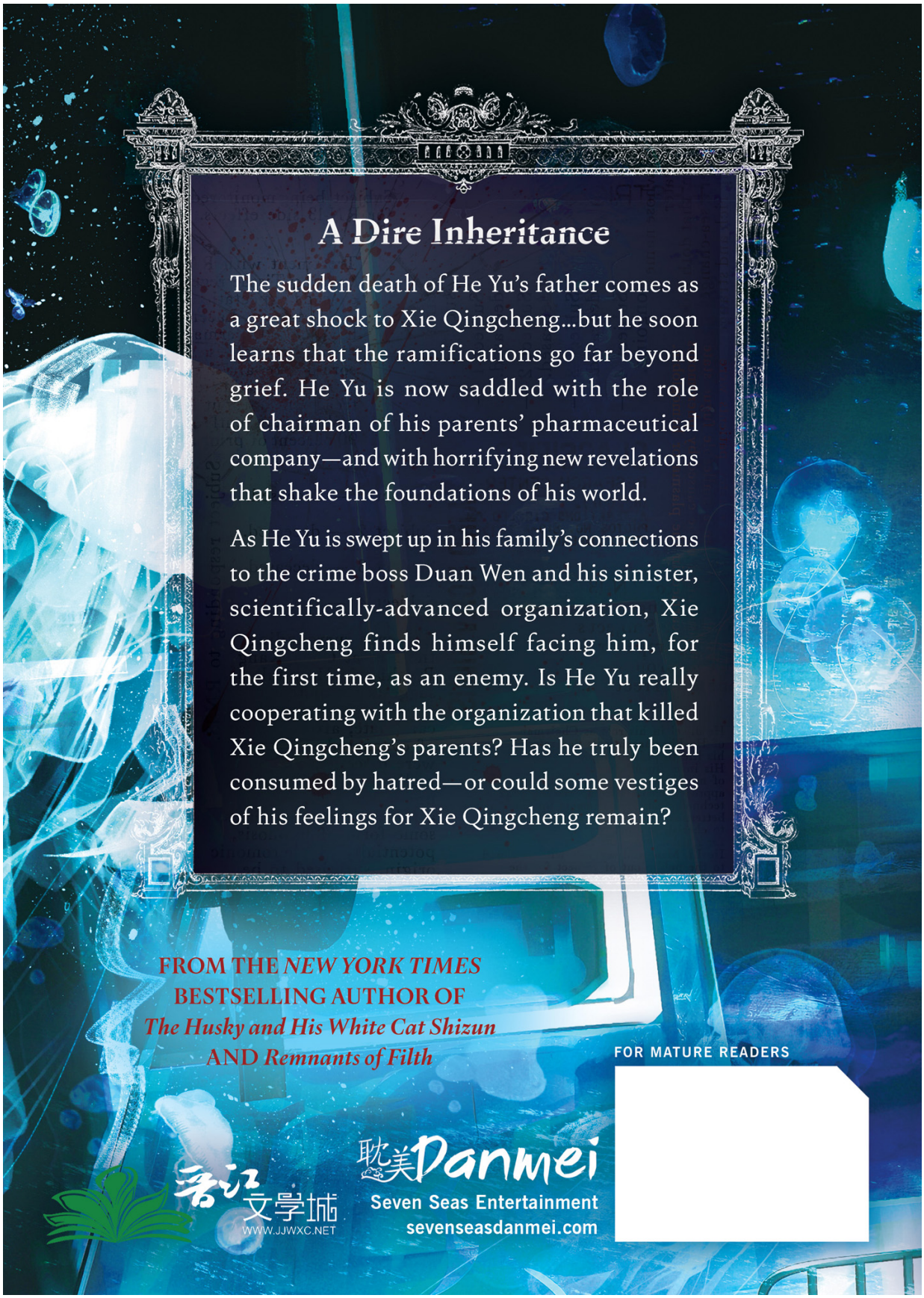
A Dire Inheritance
The sudden death of He Yu's father comes as a great shock to Xie Qingcheng...but he soon learns that the ramifications go far beyond grief. He Yu is now saddled with the role of chairman of his parents' pharmaceutical company—and with horrifying new revelations that shake the foundations of his world.
As He Yu is swept up in his family's connections to the crime boss Duan Wen and his sinister, scientifically-advanced organization, Xie Qingcheng finds himself facing him, for the first time, as an enemy. Is He Yu really cooperating with the organization that killed Xie Qingcheng's parents? Has he truly been consumed by hatred—or could some vestiges of his feelings for Xie Qingcheng remain?
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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
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AND Remnants of Filth
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